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***RAGNAR ÖSTBERG. GENIUS LOCI AND URBAN MEMORIES***  
***Stockholms Stadshuset-Nämndhuset and villa Geber***

Thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy and “Doctor Europaeus”

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The Doctorate thesis will be defended next 5th June at the Department of Architecture, University of Bologna. The original thesis was written in Italian, but here each paragraph is summarized in English language in order to offer a broad overview of the research.

Archive items collected, pictures and drawings by the author as well drive the reader in the comprehension of each paragraph's main contents. These iconographical documents are only a tiny portion of a wider selection and production attached to the original version of the study.

Particular thanks goes to four archives/libraries respectively placed in Stockholm -*Stockholms Stadsarkiv, Arkitektur-ochdesigncentrum, Kungliga Akademien för de fria konsterna e Kungliga Biblioteket*- which give me the opportunity to consult and catalogue all those iconographical items and documents presented in the Doctorate's *volume II*.

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This part owes its existence to Stefania Renzetti's (*ISV. svenska institutet i Rom*) constant support in translating short parts included in the thesis as well as those entire's ones that they are incorporated in the chapter *First part. Writings translated into Italian and commented*, vol. II



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## FOREWORD

*One of the risks in considering individual architects as actors  
making brief appearances in the saga of movements is that one may oversimplify  
their work  
and underestimate its uniqueness with a view to forcing it into a historical role.*

W. J.R. Curtis, *Modern architecture*, 1982<sup>1</sup>

The present Doctorate research aims to investigate one of the most controversial chapters in architecture, that is Swedish *National Romanticism* through the experience of one undoubtedly leading exponent, Ragnar Östberg.

Various historical critics have saddled these Nordic idioms of architecture with stylistic or eclectic labels, viewing them almost as a separate province, far from the linear evolution of the internationally nascent *Neues Bauen* and its mythical image. In actual fact, the development of an architectural language in Sweden did not entail a fracture with the past, but was a natural process of selection and discarding. This is not to ignore who Östberg's contemporaries were: for instance, Herman Muthesius (1861), Frank Lloyd Wright (1867), Peter Behrens and Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868) and so on. Yet none of these belonged to that well-known decade considered the starting point of the *Modern Movement*. Anyway, those architects had to carve out a new and proper way of expression in a period of social and cultural conflict like the nineteenth century.

According to the English critics, Swedish architecture was one plausible expression of modernity. Although it was really based on tradition, it was not traditional at all. The eclectic style is not to be considered an imitative approach to disparate historical styles, but rather a selection and reassembly of architectural features according to present ambitions, as P. Collins pointed out (1965)<sup>2</sup>. Even clearer, D. Porphyrios' (1977)<sup>3</sup> notes: *for them style was none other than a cultural memory device.*

Why is it appropriate to turn the spotlight on Swedish *National Romanticism* and the master Östberg even now?

The aim of the present study is not simply to revise the overseas reception of *National Romanticism* through the experience of Östberg, but from a

comparative analysis between two case-studies - the complex *Stockholms Stadshuset-Nämndhus* and *villa Geber* - to deduce those elements that make architecture an *urban fact* in which the community can identify.

The archipelago of Stockholm and its process of *renovatio urbis* at the turn of the twentieth century were the backdrop for two projects. These embrace two dimensions of living: the urban framework of the municipal centre and the domestic framework of the partially isolated villa.

### THE PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

*Is it not the genius of a place to give birth to its own myths,  
to shape the past according to its needs?  
The formal environment creates its historical myths,  
that are not simply shaped by consciousness and spiritual needs,  
but by the demands of form itself*

Henri Focillon, *La vie des formes*, 1943<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of the research is to embark on a voyage of discovery approaching two instances of Östberg's artwork through a twofold critical interpretation: *genius loci* and *urban memories*. The following chapters attempt to demonstrate how the two projects inevitably oscillate between seeking the *spirit of the place* and harking back to urban forms of tradition. One might consider the concept of *genius loci* far from the Nordic reality, since the origin of this term was the Latin world. However, all cultures and religions have always had mythical-pagan spirits akin to the *genius loci* and it is human to search for identity in natural places. As C. N. Schulz (1979)<sup>5</sup> said, the *locus* represents a portion of reality that belongs to architecture: it is a concrete representation of human living, whose identity depends on belonging to a place. The city has always been a metaphor of human existence, a place of memories, and this is the backdrop for our two case-studies.

The city and urban space have always been the *forum* of collective living, the public building a platform for public living. By contrast, a house has always been that private shelter in which the individual can flourish. City, public building and home are all-embracing spaces, as Alberti emphasized



in the *De re aedificatoria*.<sup>6</sup> This space stands in relation with surrounding nature, which in this case meant a highly unusual landscape.

Our investigation leads us to penetrate Östberg's repertoire of *urban memories*, as amassed from travel and study, and trace analogies of composition with other architecture in the European tradition.

The two case-studies are placed on opposite sides of developing Stockholm: the first on the outermost portion of the *Kungsholmen* peninsula and the second along the banks of the *Djurgård* canal. Although they are clearly different-scale projects, they also reveal a similar approach to composition. The *Stockholm City Hall*, including its nearby never-to-be realized part, the *Commission Building*, and *villa Geber* can be seen as significant examples of Östberg's design process: how from the *imagination passive* studies and select references to *imagination active* he manages to assemble and combine his inputs.

## THE CRITICS ON RAGNAR ÖSTBERG: STATE OF THE ART

*Criticizing is simple, which is why so many people do it.*

*Rational praise is hard, hence few do it.*

Anselm Feuerbach<sup>7</sup>

The Stockholm Town Hall has been a unique focus of critical interest. *National romanticism* has constantly been epitomised by Östberg's masterpiece. This interpreting concert seems not to allow for any other point of view, but if we look deeper we will find a small but appreciable band of critics who delved into some lesser-known projects.

In the years around the inauguration of the municipal building, two influential British figures, the photographer F. R. Yerbury and the architecture historian H. Robertson, contributed actively to changing the platitude that Swedish architecture lay off the beaten track of any modern movement. Their point of view was summed up in a significant publication, *Swedish architecture of the twentieth century* (1925)<sup>8</sup>, which proved internationally how many valuable projects had been built in Sweden during the previous decades.

## INTRODUCTION

The Swedish debate circulated thanks to a magazine called *Arkitektur*, of which Östberg was at one stage director (1908-1912).

The Stockholm Town Hall was widely publicized in international magazines, coming in for great praise, but simultaneously fierce criticism. For instance, some Italian critics - Persico (1935), Muratori (1938) and Pagano (1939)- made positive comments, while on the negative side there was the Swiss avant-garde journal *ABC*. Architectural history manuals expressed contrasting comments too.

The first monographic research was conducted by the Swedish historian Elias Cornell in 1965. Until now his *Ragnar Östberg svenske arkitekt* has been the last word on Östberg's evolving idiom. That same year an Italian researcher, S. Ray, published an insightful analysis of Scandinavian architecture from a cross-discipline perspective.

Since the 80s interest in Swedish architecture has progressively reappeared in the European critical panorama.

The present research is undoubtedly indebted to J. Mårtelius' s contribution to the *International Symposium on the architecture of Asplund* in 1985, L. Ortelli's study (*Ragnar Östberg: Municipio di Stoccolma*, 1990) and his following essays as well. Recently, A. K. P. Atmer published an enormous volume, the result of long research at the *Stockholm Stadsarkiv*, where the Town Hall drawings are collected (*Stockholms stadhus och arkitekten Ragnar Östberg*, 2011).

The municipal building has evidently monopolised global attention, so that its nearby unbuilt part - the *Stockholms Nämndhuset*- has never been properly investigated and neither has the *villa Geber*.

## RESEARCH STRUCTURE

The present research is composed of two volumes, where the first one covers the fundamental *corpus* about Ragnar Östberg's architectural idiom from a general viewpoint, followed by investigation in the form of two case-studies.

As in epic literature, here the first chapter is called a Preamble (*Proemio*). After that, there are another three descriptive chapters. In the classic epic structure, the first part focuses attention on the main issue and various

events, followed by an invocation to an inspiring Muse or perhaps a dedication to someone important. The reason why our first chapter harks back to epic structure lies in the common view of him as a “hero” of that architectural re-foundation in Swedish panorama. In addition, Swedish literati contribute to shape that mythic and epic backdrop, as we can find in Heidenstam’s works. Thus, the *Proemio* of this research sums up all those significant steps in Östberg’s formative years and architectural idiom. Following this, there is not an invocation in this case, but simply the aim of the concluding section - *1.6 Renovatio Urbis Stockholm. Conferring a proper character*- is to describe the reason why the present study compares two projects: we might consider it an exhortation to all Swedish people. The three ensuing chapters introduce other aspects of this research, the first two chapters concerning the two case-studies and the last one attempting a comparative analysis between them.

The comparative analysis has been also conducted through re-drawing the *exempla* selected. These drawings enrich the critical text of the first volume.

The second volume contains all the archival and critical apparatus.

There is a selection of ten essays mainly written in Swedish and, here, translated into Italian and commented. The criterion for this selection derives from the critical and personal interpretation. Eight of them were written by Östberg, the other two by Swedish architectural historians.

The lectures’ slides at the *Kungliga Konsthögskolan* (1921-1931) given by the Swedish architect are here presented and commented in order to explain his repertoire of images and sceneries.

A selection of original drawings is also attached in the second volume.





## 1.1 “NIGHTLANDS” AND THE NATIONAL ROMANTIC SPIRIT

*There he felt amidst the nature he had always sought;  
idyllic, rough, rocky islets dotted with clumps of firs,  
cast upon the wide expanse of roaring foamy sea against a never-ending  
horizon.*

*Later he would keep faith with this first love, and neither the snowy Alps,  
nor the olive-clad slopes of the Mediterranean ,  
or the rocky coasts of Normandy,  
would ever erase that gleaming vision of water and light...*

August Strindberg, *The nature*<sup>9</sup>

Portion of ophite column in *Kalte Küche*,  
*Ilmpark*

Ph. L. Held, *Rassegna* n. 45 (1991)

Stockholm: the lake Mälaren in the  
winter

Ph. author

A sincere devotion to that wild and unwelcoming landscape resounds in the Swedish intellectual's words. Nordic *topoi* remind us of a reality utterly in contrast to the South: a universe full of mysterious forces, where the general atmosphere conjures depth of feeling. The reason why the Nordic culture and geography can be called “romantic” is clear from here.

Natural forces and echoes of a fairy-tale past undoubtedly influenced literature, the arts and architecture, and human temperament in general. Seeking those mysteries of the Scandinavian landscape is none other than



the search for a *genius loci*. Literati and artists have pondered this empathy with landscape, which drives humanity somewhere far back in the past. Nostalgia for age-old centuries and the heroic middle ages filled their minds, and these two features helped to spread nationalistic feelings.

During the last quarter of the 19th century massive industrialization and nationalistic sentiments had progressively spread throughout the Scandinavian countries, generating a desire for nationhood which owed something to the still undefined boundaries of these nations. The core of the matter was to preserve local culture, traditions and values. Stressing the national identity was how they sustained their belief in individual freedom, social harmony and symbiosis with natural *habitus*. Christian Norberg-Schulz's (1996)<sup>10</sup> definition, *nightlands*, explains that emotional and artistic atmosphere, and provides a new way of conceptualizing that fragmented, floating topological space.

So far the notions "romantic" and "national" are not deliberately matched, as historian J. Roosval (1929)<sup>11</sup> pointed out in labelling the movement "National Romanticism", since this cultural and artistic atmosphere can effectively be described even without a historical label.

In the present study, Stockholm embodies "a part of Sweden", as in the figure of speech called *synecdoche*. Indeed, the oldest city of the Swedish kingdom, situated where Baltic Sea and *lake Mälaren* join hands, is a microcosm of the wider Scandinavian peninsula.

## 1.2 GENESIS OF A *NORDEN* MASTER'S ARCHITECTURAL IDIOM

*..the more I ponder on my art, the more I exercise it.  
The more I think and act,  
the more I am pained yet proud to be an architect  
and myself intensely for what with ever-surer delight and clarity.*

Paul Valery, *Eupalinos on l'Architecte*, 1923<sup>12</sup>

Ragnar Östberg was born in July 1886, in a summer house on an island in the archipelago, *Rindö*, not far from Stockholm; he would pass away in the cold February of 1945.

He was sincerely fond of that birthplace his whole life long. There he came close to a place where unique natural features are to the fore. There He would spend periods of the short Nordic summer, or else a couple of days in order to refresh his mind from absorption in the troublesome processes of design.

He condensed his thoughts into a huge amount of forceful statements and books; thanks to them we can appreciate the importance of their legacy. Any researcher wishing to explore the Swedish panorama should devote time to them, even though their bold and sometimes over self-



Ragnar Östberg, 1915

© wikipedia

confident character might conceal some aspects while shrinking from in-depth analysis of certain issues. In interpreting his formative years and consequently his repertoire of images, we need to penetrate beyond his words.

Research in the archives reveals an enormous quantity of valuable items: there is still unexplored matter to dig up. It is fair to say that Östberg was not only the architect of the celebrated Stockholm Town Hall. He was involved in many projects, but only few of them were published in foreign magazines at that time. It was the same in histories of architecture, where the attention focused only on the municipal building.

The original drawings and buildings show how great his ability was, how he managed to articulate a personal idiom embodying Swedish character, both in domestic projects and in urban ones.

That notion of *character* derives from Quatremère de Quincy's (1832)<sup>13</sup> depiction: each building was stamped not with an aesthetic concept, but with an intrinsic *quality*.

Östberg was a leading exponent of the *National Romanticism*, but nearly all generations of Scandinavian architects have considered him a master. Ahlberg (1965)<sup>14</sup> rated him *an excellent talent, a master at drawing as well as writing*.



## 1.1 TRAVEL MEMOIRS: SHADOWS FROM THE SOUTH

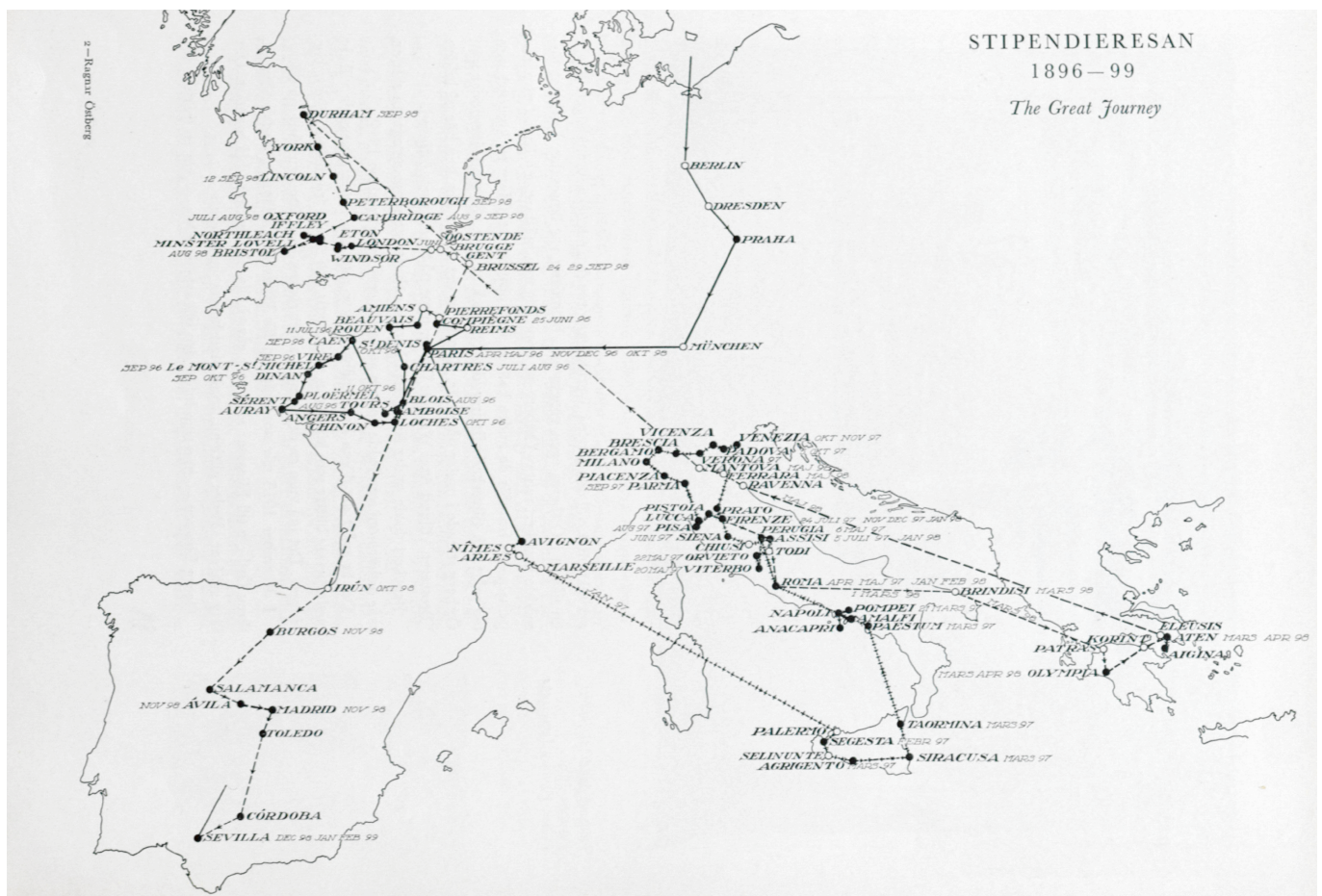
*The only true voyage of discovery, the only fountain of eternal youth,  
would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes,  
to behold the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others,  
to behold the hundred universes that each of them beholds, that each of them is...*

Marcel Proust, *La prisonnière*, 1923<sup>15</sup>

Map of the Östberg's journey in Europe (1896-1899) drawn by Elias Cornell

in Ragnar Östberg *svensk arkitekt*, 1965

After centuries of popularity, late 19th century educational travel began to change and lose something of the 18th century aristocratic *Grand Tour*. The South remained the focus of interest, the cradle of that culture from which Europe's own had grown. Swedish master Östberg saw this new way of "contemplating" as the personal formation of that *spiritual family*,



according to Focillon's point of view (1934)<sup>16</sup>. The architect managed to combine personal inclination with previous academic studies, so that he was capable of expressing that change in his architectural idiom.

The second part of the title, "shadows from the South", might be interpreted as an *oxymoron* that clearly sums up the two contrasting cultural and geographical realities, South and North, and the attempt by architects of the day to create a national and proper art form. Travelling fed his imagination, supplied him with pages of sketches and notes on that Mediterranean culture which would later cool in northern waters and waft like a *shade* or *aura* along the Stockholm streets, as suggested by Clemen (1923)<sup>17</sup> during the Stockholm Town Hall inauguration.

Östberg virtually retraced his mentor I. G. Clason's steps (1883-1886), who was the forefather of modern Swedish travelling-architects. Besides, he added some pioneering and unconventional itineraries which broadened his interest in other architectural ages and disparate experiences. Receiving a three-year *Konstakademiens byggnadsskola* travel scholarship (1896-1899), he spent the first year travelling across Germany, and mainly France. After that, he departed from Marseilles harbour bound for the South of Italy in January 1897. He spent approximately two months going round Sicily. Afterwards, he travelled from South to North of the Italian peninsula over the entire year. In March 1898 he headed back South to Brindisi, in order to embark on a two-month journey round Greece. At the end of it, he left for Belgium. The last year he travelled in England and Spain. He felt deeply unsatisfied since he was old, but above all he had not yet built anything important. He had no idea as yet how many great and challenging projects he would be involved in as soon as he came back to Stockholm.

## 1.4 VERNACULAR BYGGKONST AND SYMBIOSIS AMONG ARTS

....architecture is the yardstick of a nation's honour, discernment and earnestness.

Joseph-Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*, 1882<sup>18</sup>

Östberg and other architects involved  
in the construction of the Stockholm  
Town hall, 1905

© wikipedia

The building-site and craft atelier in  
*Hantverkargatan 1* (Stockholm)

© Arkitektur-och designcentrum

ARKM.1988-102-5

Swedish national romanticists strove to re-cast the artistic disciplines, searching for identity-building elements through significant idioms and proper use of building materials. As a result, philosopher-literati and artist-architects focused on the search for their own origins through a vernacular idiom conveying moral, spiritual and national values.

Those thoughts stood in sharp contrast with the widespread effects of the second industrial revolution. Opposing movements were born in various European countries, each of them clear expression of a specific local tradition. *National Romanticism* was partly indebted to one of these, that is the British *Arts&Crafts* movement, whose leading exponents were William Morris and John Ruskin. Their reformist theories argued that artistic innovation should be based on nature, not on machines.

During the previous century the quality of craftsman had progressively grown worse due to the disappearance of valuable historic ateliers and artist guilds. In that situation, it was vital to revive the prospects of a





real craft renaissance according to the ancient guild system, as well as to develop craftsmen's skills and promote public taste in the aesthetics of the home environment. These last two concepts encapsulated the ambition behind the *Svenska Slöjdföreningen* (Swedish Society for Crafts and Design) which was founded in 1845. The early studies on Swedish folklore and rural tradition by historian N. Månsson and ethnographer A. Hazelius paved the way for the society. We notice with surprise that the German counterpart, *Deutscher Werkbund*, was founded more than sixty years later (1907), through Hermann Muthesius.

In these years, the painter R. Bergh showed his genius for gathering together young architects - such as Östberg and Westman- in order to set up a school for craftsmen: the *Konstnärsförbundet* (Artistic League, 1903). Östberg argued that all visual arts should work together closely, creating a balanced interplay of popular culture and craftsmanship.

He said that *a skilful craftsman embodies the material and spiritual connecting link, much as a single tessera composes a mosaic* and even more essential is *active collaboration among architects, engineers and artists in the construction of a building* (1927)<sup>19</sup>. The only way to implement these thoughts was proper use of building materials, brick, granite and wood.

## 1.5 KONSTAKADEMINS BYGGNADSSKOLA. THE LEGACY OF HIS LECTURES (1921-1931)

*All education must be channelled first of all  
towards the practical side of life.  
....If learning means anything,  
it is to form character and develop intuition.*

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, 1938 <sup>20</sup>

The first time Östberg gave a lecture was many years previously, when he was invited to take part in an independent school of architecture called *Klara Skola*.

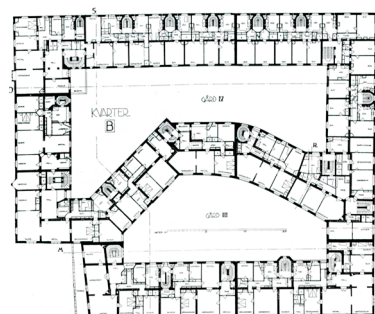
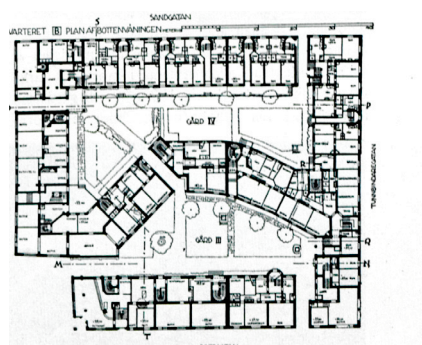
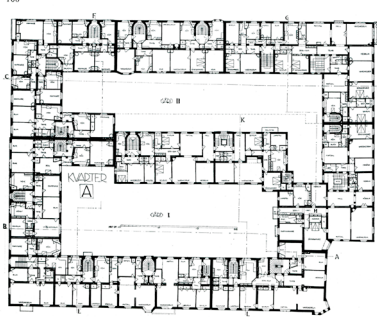
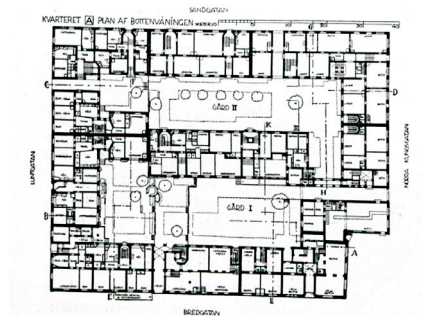
He never taught in an institute for architecture until he substituted his colleague I. Tengbom as Professor of Architecture at the *Konstakademics byggnadsskola* (Royal Swedish Academy of Art) from 1922 on.

The *Klara Skola* was set up in 1910 and came to an end in the middle of 1911, and included E. G. Asplund, S. Lewerentz and O. Almqvist, among its founders. Östberg's service marked the handing over of the baton between these three Swedish architects. Six young students, after concluding their studies, turned to four major architects in the Swedish panorama at that time -Östberg, Westman, Tengbom and Bergsten- to offer more practical courses. Masters and pupils worked on projects together in a fruitful atmosphere akin to an atelier.

As mentioned previously, Östberg and his friend Westman also taught at the evening school promoted by the artists' guild. And yet he had never felt good at teaching, a conviction which channelled his interests mainly towards the search for a proper Swedish character for new architecture. When he was a student at the *Konstakademics byggnadsskola* (1888 – 1891) he outspokenly criticized C. Grundström's teaching method based on rigid principles deduced from the French *Beaux-arts*.

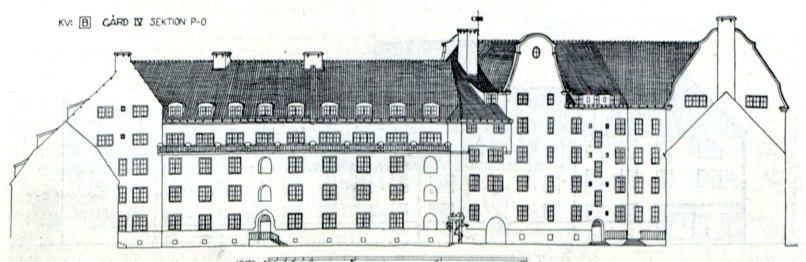
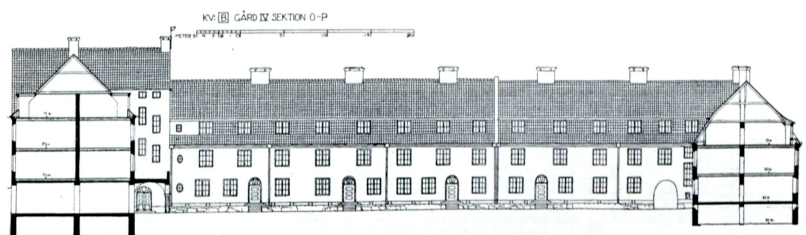
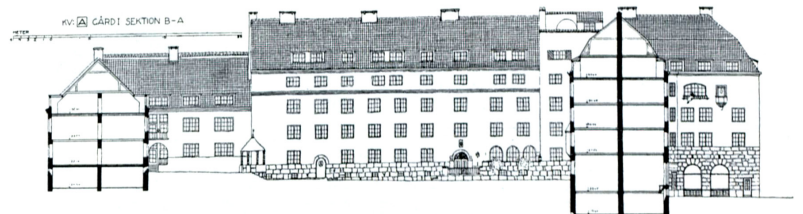
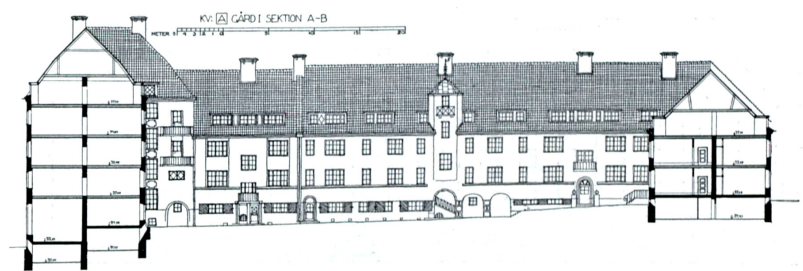
Östberg's ten-year teaching experience started around the last years of his life-long work, the construction of the Stockholm Town Hall, and finished one year later than the great *Stockholm Exhibition* (1930). The body of professors considered him the prime candidate to replace

*Klara skola*: proposals “A” and “B”  
designed by two student groups  
in *Arkitektur* 42 (1912)



Tengbom. Even though he had no adequate teaching experience, they praised his long activity as an architect. Each yearly course he devoted to a new project area, always situated in Stockholm.

Research in the *Arkitektur-ochdesigncentrum* reveals twelve boxes containing many slides of those lectures. Östberg taught his students through his own sketches, drawings from the French and German architectural treatises, photos and magazine cuttings. The images chosen clearly reflect his practical conception of teaching. Each lecture comprised a journey of discovery among his repertoire of scenery. Unfortunately, there is not any kind of transcript and few notes in support of the slides.

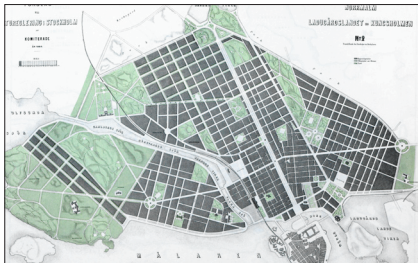




## 1.6 *RENOVATIO URBIS* STOCKHOLM. CONFERRING A PROPER CHARACTER

*My eyes are hence on this city: this is how and, in my case, why.  
As if space -here, more than anywhere else- aware of its inferiority to time,  
responded with the only feature  
that time does not possess: beauty.*

Iosif Brodskij, *Fondamenta degli Incurabili*, 1991<sup>21</sup>



H. Neuhaus, *Panorama över Stockholm*,  
1870  
coloured lithography

A. Lindhagen, *Esplanadsystemet.  
Stadsplanering i Stockholm*, 1866  
© Stockholms Stadsarkiv

The *last hero of the North* (Ortelli, 1990)<sup>22</sup> claims our attention not only because he wanted to re-found Swedish architecture against the *cosmopolitan and chameleon* (1901)<sup>23</sup> mentality that marks so many *fin de siècle* experiments scattered around the city, but also because he helped to confer a proper national character to Stockholm's *imago urbis*, an almost epic labour. His was not a lone voice: Muthesius called that period none other than an *artistic chaos* (1902)<sup>24</sup>.

In those years, Stockholm became a testing ground for the application of national romantic theories and ideas. The Swedish capital, once a provincial city on the margins of Europe, rapidly became a metropolis of the *Norden*. It called for new plans shaping its appearance, the first being the *Lindhagenplanen* (Lindhagen's urban plan, 1866), which was clearly inspired by Hausmann's renovation plan of Paris.

By contrast, the national romantic architects were not interested in global urban design; they focused on specific points of the city, according to the *renovatio urbis* concept used in Venice under Doge Gritti or in Rome during Julius II's papacy. This approach was mostly due to those geographical features that distinguished Stockholm from other European cities: its being scattered on islands of an archipelago.

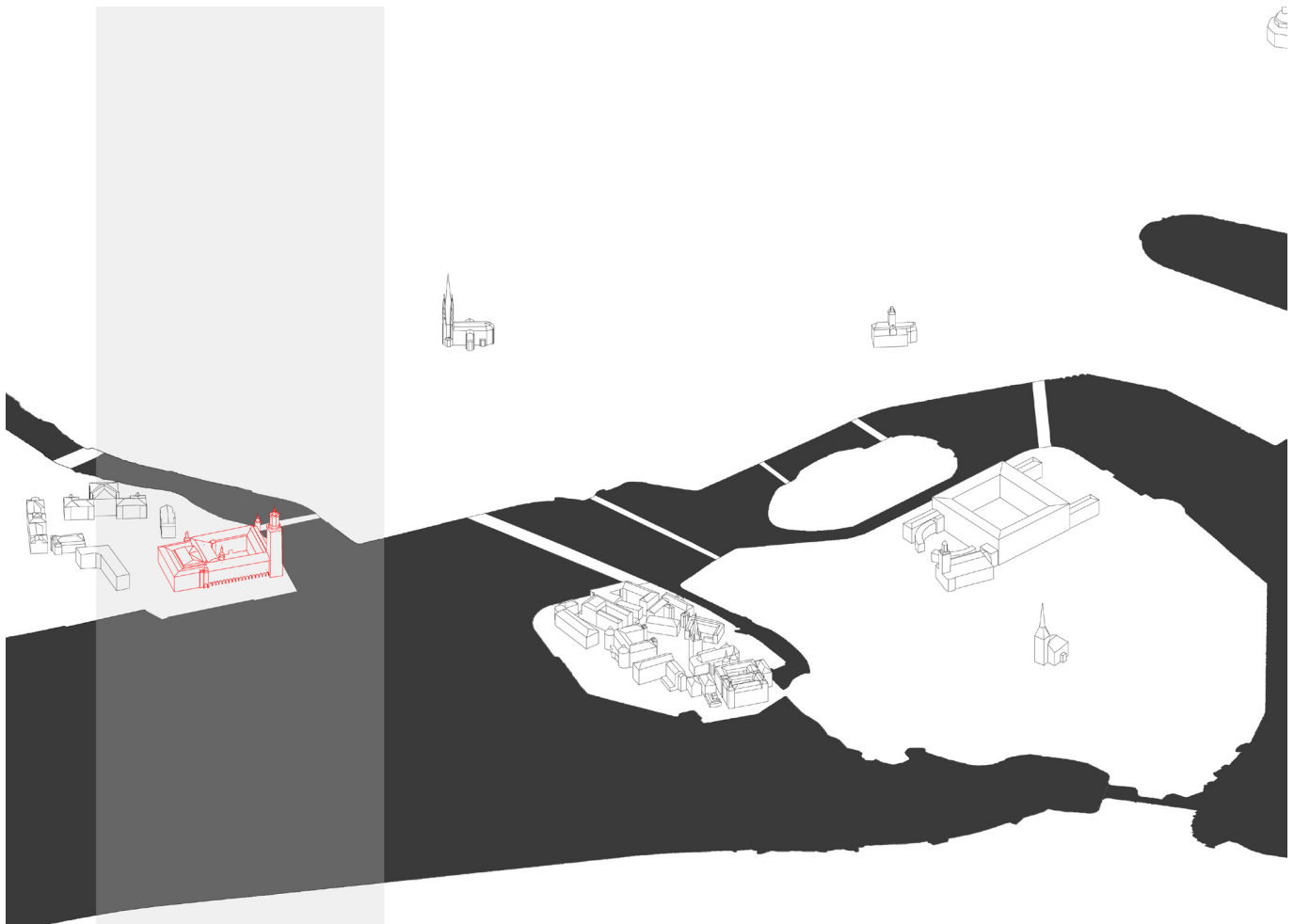
Stockholm should be interpreted as an *interrupted continuity* (Bettini, 1988)<sup>25</sup>, like its sibling lagoon city on islands: Venice. More than a repertoire of images, the latter was a real wonderland for Nordic architects, as Persico said (1935)<sup>26</sup>. Stockholm has often been called “the Venice of the North”; but it was not till now that this description became a fact. Historically, the expression had obvious roots in the almost identical topography of the two cities.

Franz Hogenberg, Panorama of  
Stockholm, 1588

lithograph

in George Braun, *Civitates Orbis  
Terrarum*, volume IV

Nature and city join hands and form the backdrop for Östberg's projects, as in the two presented case-studies: the *Stockholm City Hall* with its never realized adjacent parts, the *Commission Building* and *villa Geber*. They condense imagination and design into a synthetic method, that of the "analogous city" (Rossi, 1975)<sup>27</sup>, a questing method focusing on "reality" and "myth" of a city, where myth exerts a palpable effect (Bonfanti, 2001)<sup>28</sup>.



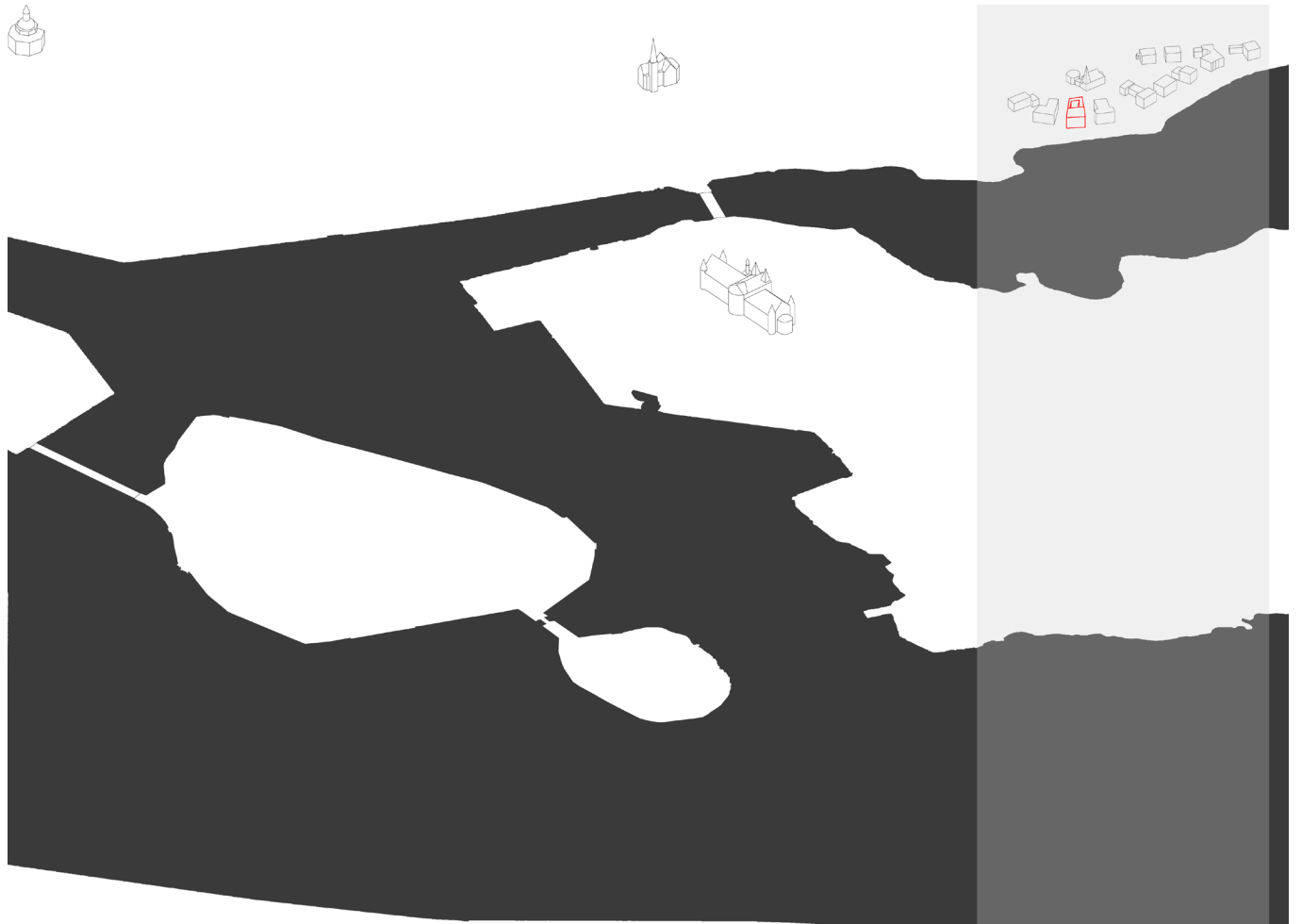
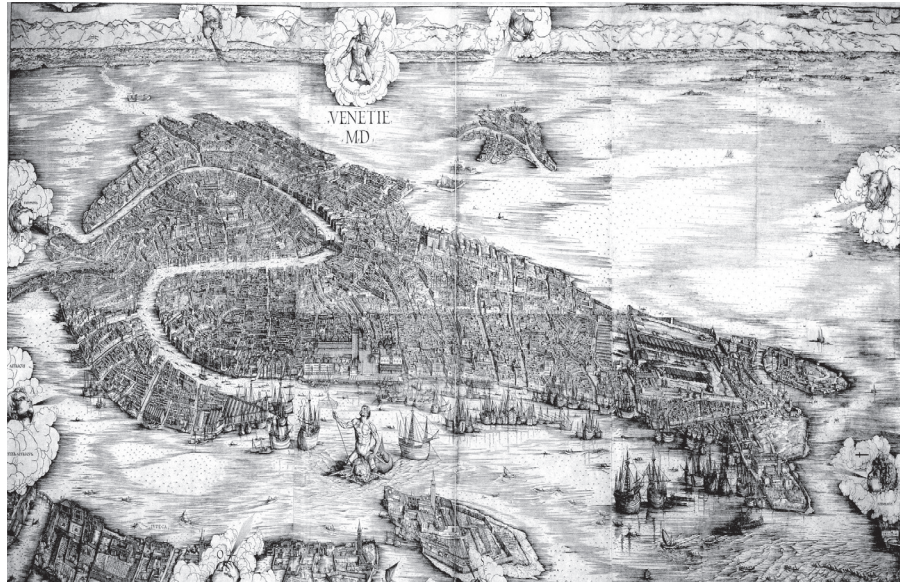
Jacopo de' Barbari, Maps of Venice,  
1500

© Museo Correr, Venezia

Below:

Isometric projection that displays  
"primary elements" of Stockholm  
and two areas where the coomplex  
*Stockholms Stadshuset -Nämndhuset* and  
*villa Geber* are placed

*Author's drawing*







## 2.1 THE STOCKHOLMS STADSHUSET. A LIFE-LONG BUILDING OPERATION

*I have no soul,  
I interred it in that building over there.*

Ragnar Östberg<sup>29</sup>

Östberg sat on the staircase of the  
Stockholm 'Town hall' *trädgården*, 1933

in *Bonnkundig Weekblad*, 8 (April, 1947)

24th June 1923: the inauguration  
ceremony in the Blue hall

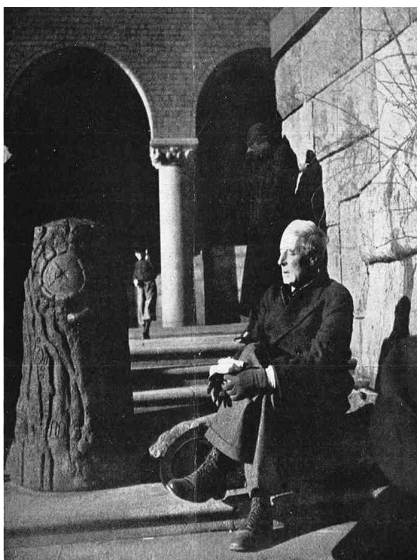
in J. Roosval, *Stockholms stadshus vid dess  
invigning midsommarafton 1923*

The inauguration date -23th June 1923- marked the moment when the “designed creature”, custodian of Östberg’s soul, detached from the architect and offered itself magnificently to the critics, the world and the history of a nation. That date corresponded to the fourth centenary of Gustav Vasa’s triumphal entry into Stockholm after liberating the Swedes from Danish domination. Celebrating the splendours of Swedish history was a way to feed the literati, artists and architects’ repertoires. That year was also crucial in Sweden for the International Exhibition in Göteborg, which attracted overseas interest.

The *Stockholms Stadshuset* was the life companion of Östberg’s thoughts: the designing process lasted twenty-two years (1901-1923), while building it covered a timespan of twelve years (1911-1923).

The length of time in building and the fine quality of the craftsmanship involved resembles the building of mediaeval cathedrals.

The architect embodies the solitary genius as the Romantic conception





emphasized, but his masterpiece here represents a choral example of artwork. Goethe's passage in his *chef-d'œuvre* (Faust, 1831)<sup>30</sup> illustrates the concept: *for the most imposing and sublime endeavour to be achieved, all that is needed is a mind and an arm (acting) for thousands* The Stockholm Town hall is a clear symbol of civic pride and national identity, and an elegant evocation of a mythical splendour as well.

A prolonged and animated debate took place inside the city planning office before a plan of operations could be drawn up and an area located in which the new *urban metaphor* might be situated. The decision converged on the *Eldkvarnen* area (1901). Two competitions were announced; Östberg won first place with the project *Mälardrottningen* (Lake Mälär's queen, 1904-1905). In 1908-1909 the planning scheme was unanimously approved: to design a municipal building. At this point, the architect showed a new global proposal for the area: in effect a model "part of city".

The complex was finally comprised two main buildings: the Town Hall facing onto the southern waters and an Administration building.

The "urban metaphor" and the central islands of *Riddarholmen* and *Gamla stan*, 1925

© Arkitektur -och designcentrum  
ARKM.2006-104-001-021



## 2.2 DESIGNING A “PART OF THE CITY” ALONG THE KLARA SJÖ

*Some time, and probably quite soon, we shall have to  
face up to what is missing from our great towns:  
broad tranquil areas carved out for meditation,  
places with long spacious colonnades for bad weather or undue sun,  
undisturbed by the bustle of vehicles and hucksters,  
in which a more delicate sense of nicety would also ban the raised voice of priestly  
prayer:  
edifices and public gardens that would combine to express the sublimity  
of meditating and walking in solitude....*

F. W. Nietzsche, *La gaia scienza*, 1882<sup>31</sup>

In the following pages:

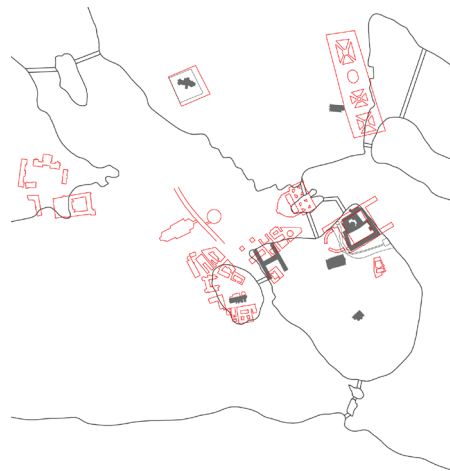
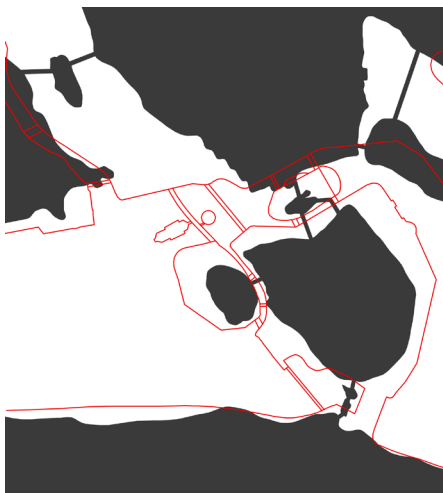
Historical maps and comparative  
drawings about the evolution of the  
portion of *Kungsholmen* peninsula

© *Stockholm Stadsarkiv*  
*Author's drawing*

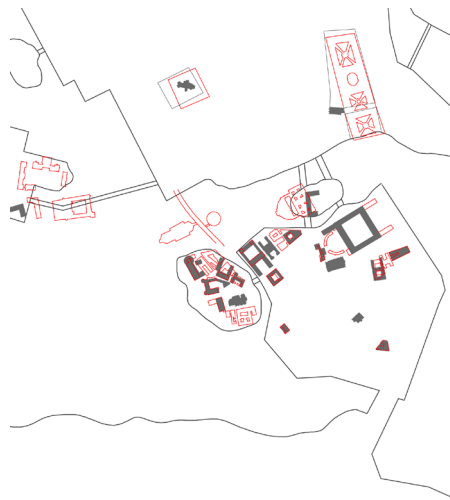
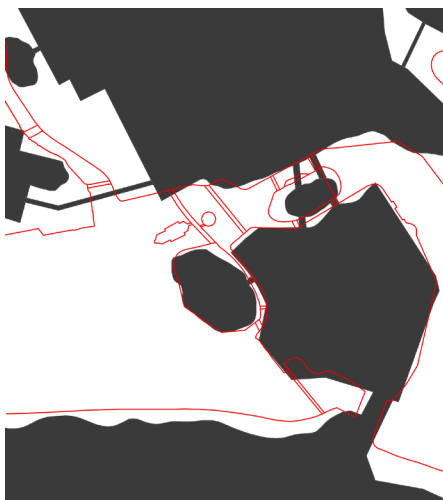
Östberg's proposals for the  
monumental centre such as the  
*Stockholms Stadshuset-Nämndhuset*.  
Those projects highlighted in red were  
widely designed by the architect  
*Author's drawing*



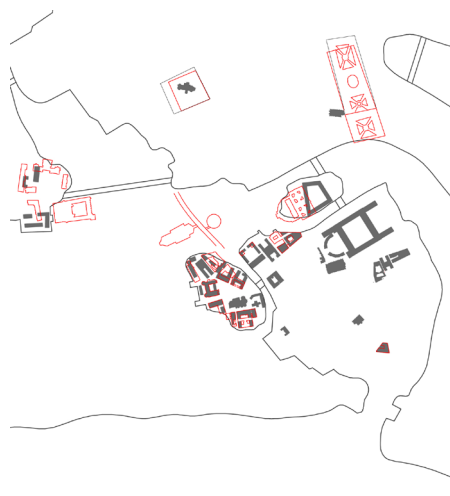
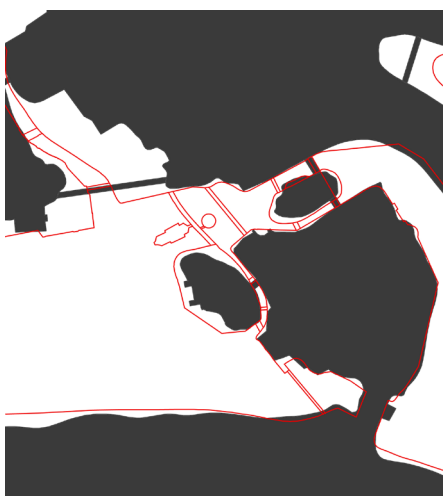
1642



1702



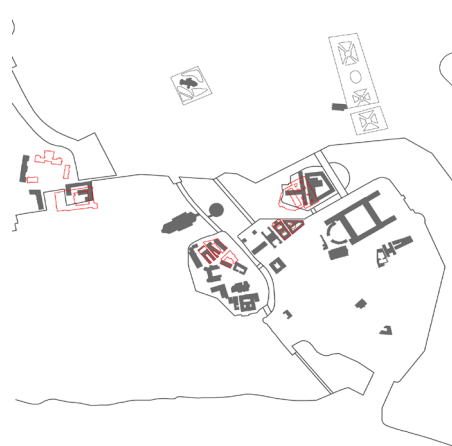
1805



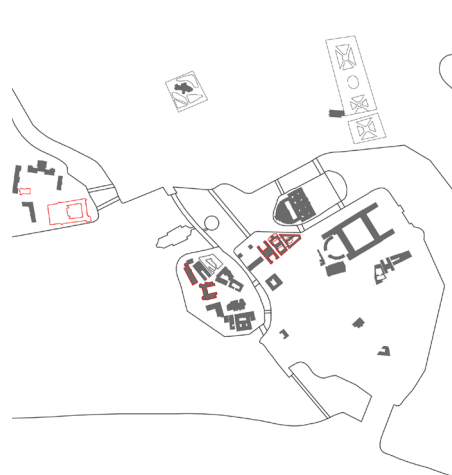




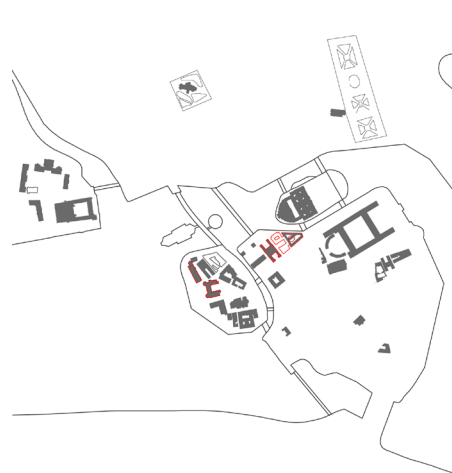
1885



1909



1930



1902-04



1905



1907



1908-11



1912



1916



1930



1936



1939



1940



A monumental centre such as the *Stockholms Stadshuset-Nämndhuset* needs to express the complexity of a historical city with its own figurative repertoire. Evidently, building a monument has always been a design issue as well as a statement by architecture in all ages. The European tradition of the municipal building here becomes a “catalyst” for the new urban development scattered in capital cities with their civic and cultural functions, as describe by Zucconi (2001)<sup>32</sup>.

That “part of the city” as Rossi called it (1966)<sup>33</sup> would have to encapsulate the main features of the old core of Stockholm - *Gamla Stan*, *Riddarholmen* and *Skepsbolmen*- and its singular geographical structure. Östberg conceived the entire complex as a sequential narration of urban spaces, each of them with its own character. He reinterpreted the place according to spaces with a different scale and character. This kind of compositional method resembles Sitte’s theories (1889)<sup>34</sup>, which consistently influenced the Nordic world. H. J. Stübgen’s treatise<sup>35</sup> on urban design was a source of inspiration too.

Right from the outset, one of the challenges in this project was to connect this part of the city to the nearby central *Norrmalm* peninsula. Building a bridge accessible to pedestrians and vehicles like those Östberg had seen in Rome, Florence, London and Paris would be an essential part of the overall composition. Another important aspect was the different height of the ground between the two portions that formed the project. The *Eldkvarnen* area was an opportunity to conduct a “compositional experiment” with two issues of the historical city: the civic monument and the town square.

The architect worked out a huge amount of proposals for both buildings, but the *Stockholms Nämndhuset* was never built. This process covered a long time, respectively 1901-1923 for the Stockholm Town hall and 1907-1940 for the Administration building.

Research in the archives enables us to see how the entire complex evolved, particularly the adjacent part since it was never built and never deeply examined until now. Original documents reveal that Östberg draw up twelve layouts, though only five of them were developed.

## 2.3 TRADITION AND THE CITY.

## A REPERTOIRE OF IMAGES AND TOWNSCAPES

*A town is not made of this,  
but of relations between its spatial proportions and the events of its past...  
The town absorbs like a sponge and swells with the wave flowing from its memories...  
But a town does not tell its past, it contains it like the lines of a hand.*

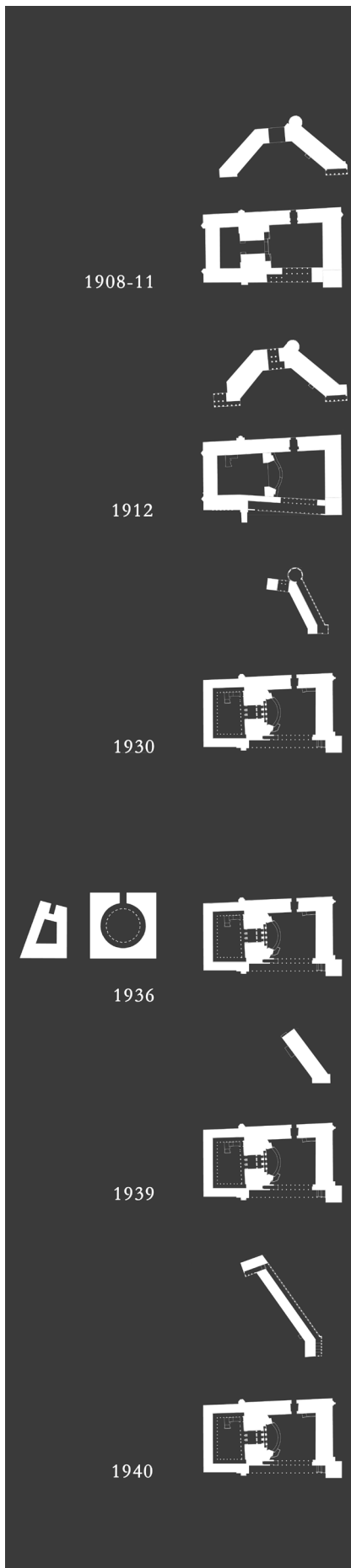
Italo Calvino, *Le città invisibili*, 1972<sup>36</sup>

The city is formed of historical layering, urban memories of faraway countries and spatial interplay. Some of those travelling fragments are explicit, yet subtly concealed; in the main they came from Venice. Indeed, the Klara sjö might be likened to the sinuous Canal Grande, the spine along which Venice grew up. The visual interplay between the municipal centre and the island of *Riddarholmen* is similar to that between the complex of San Marco and the island of San Giorgio. In both cases, there is a public “water room” stretching between them. As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, as early as 1908 the Stockholm Town Hall begun to be planned as a juxtaposition between a huge civic court (*Borgargården*) and a great roofed hall (*Blå Hallen*) resembling the central European tradition of the *Lichthöfe*.

After various changes (1908-11, 1912, 1916) building finally began on the *Stockholms Stadshus* in 1916. To be fair one should also say that the Swedish castle tradition influenced the design of the Stockholm Town Hall. For instance, *Läckö Slottet* was a major point of reference.

From the countless proposals for the Administration building we can trace two main approaches: on the one hand, a gallery-building along the Klara shore (1908-09, 1912, 1930, 1940), on the other hand, two massive urban blocks akin in their severe volume to the *Blå Hallen* (1936).

The aim of the first approach is to design the edge of the shore as a natural continuation of the Town Hall's east façade. The first three layouts presented also concluded their eastern façade with a circular-plan tower as in the Vasa castles. As we float down the Klara we can recognize similarities, in terms of dimensions and language, between



In the previous page:

Ground floor plans of those proposals widely designed by Östberg

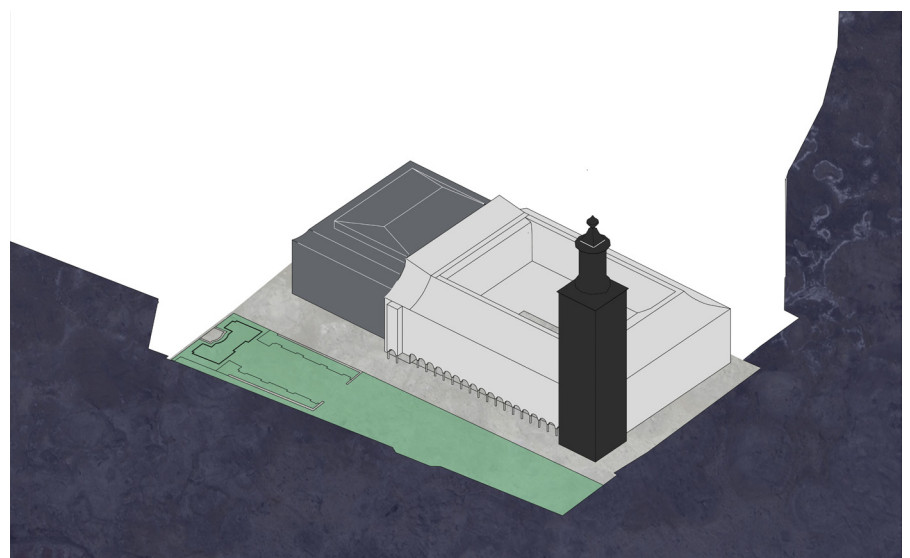
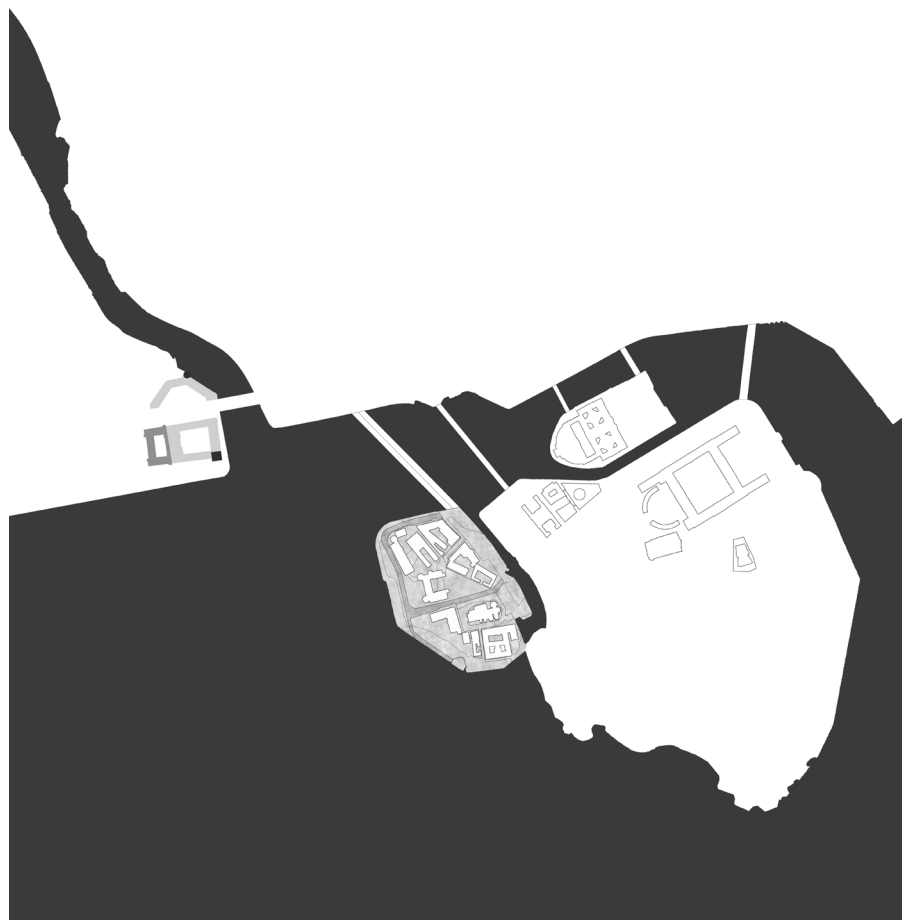
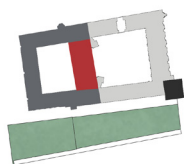
*Author's drawing*

the four different proposals and Sansovino's *Fabbriche nuove* at the Rialto (1555-1556).

In the second project two four-square buildings were obviously inspired by the dialectical composition of certain Renaissance or Baroque palaces, where the urban façades were severely plain, while the courtyard would be more intricately laid out.

G. W. Cronquist, A view of Riddarholmen from the South portico of the Stockholm City Hall, 1934

© *Stockholm Stadsarkiv*





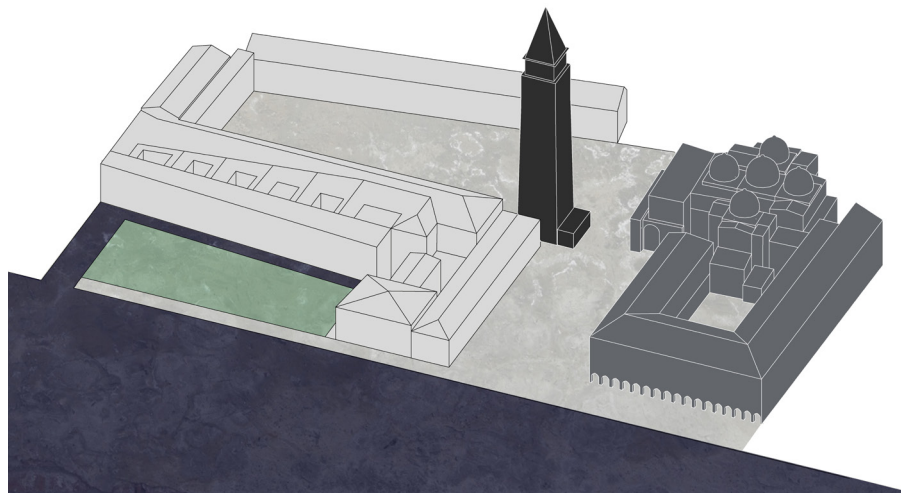
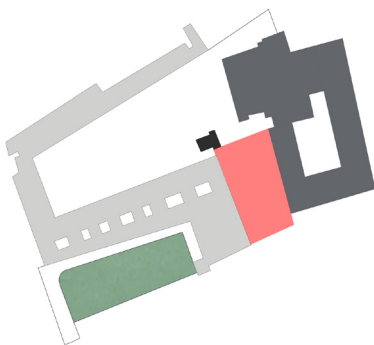
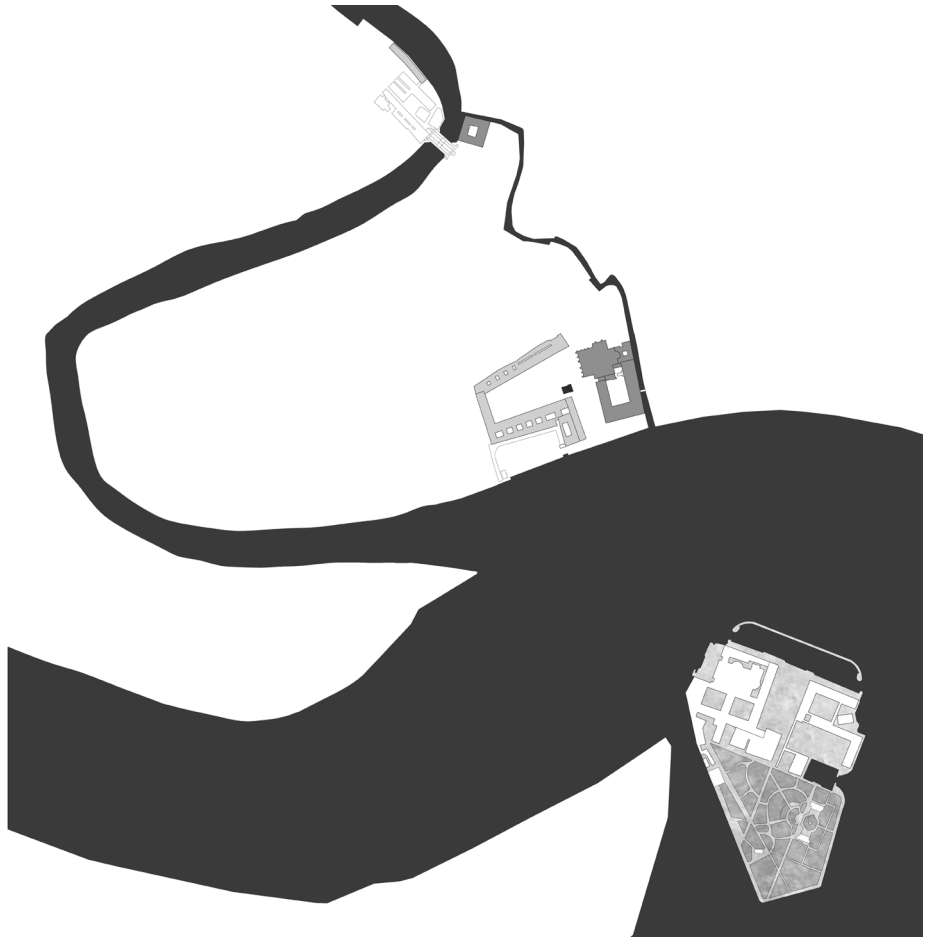
In both pages:

Analogous comparison between  
Stockholm and Venice: the “water  
squares”, visual relationship with facing  
island and architectural *topoi*

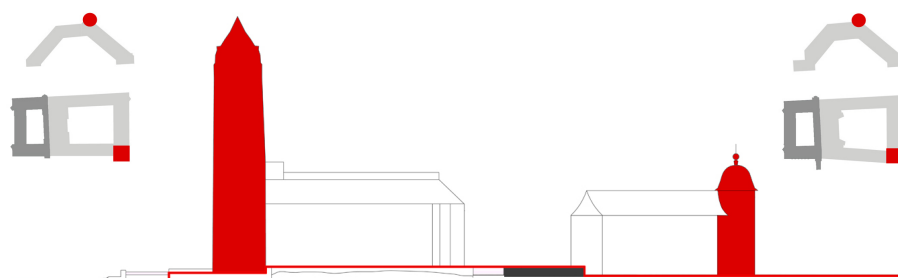
*Author's drawing*

Doge Palace's loggiato frames the view  
of the Isola di San Giorgio

*Ph. author*







Comparative drawings throughout proposals that display the entrance façade from the *Stadshusetbro*.

These proposals show how the architect conceptualized the gallery-building and the presence of a tower

1:2500

1908-11 e 1912

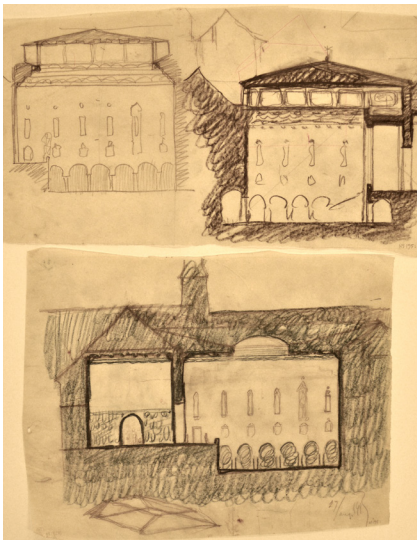
1930

1939

1940

*Author's drawing*





An example among the huge quantity of sketches about the *hallen* made by the architect, 1917

© *Stockholms Stadsarkiv*

Comparative drawings that show the evolution of the *hallen* throughout proposals

1:2000

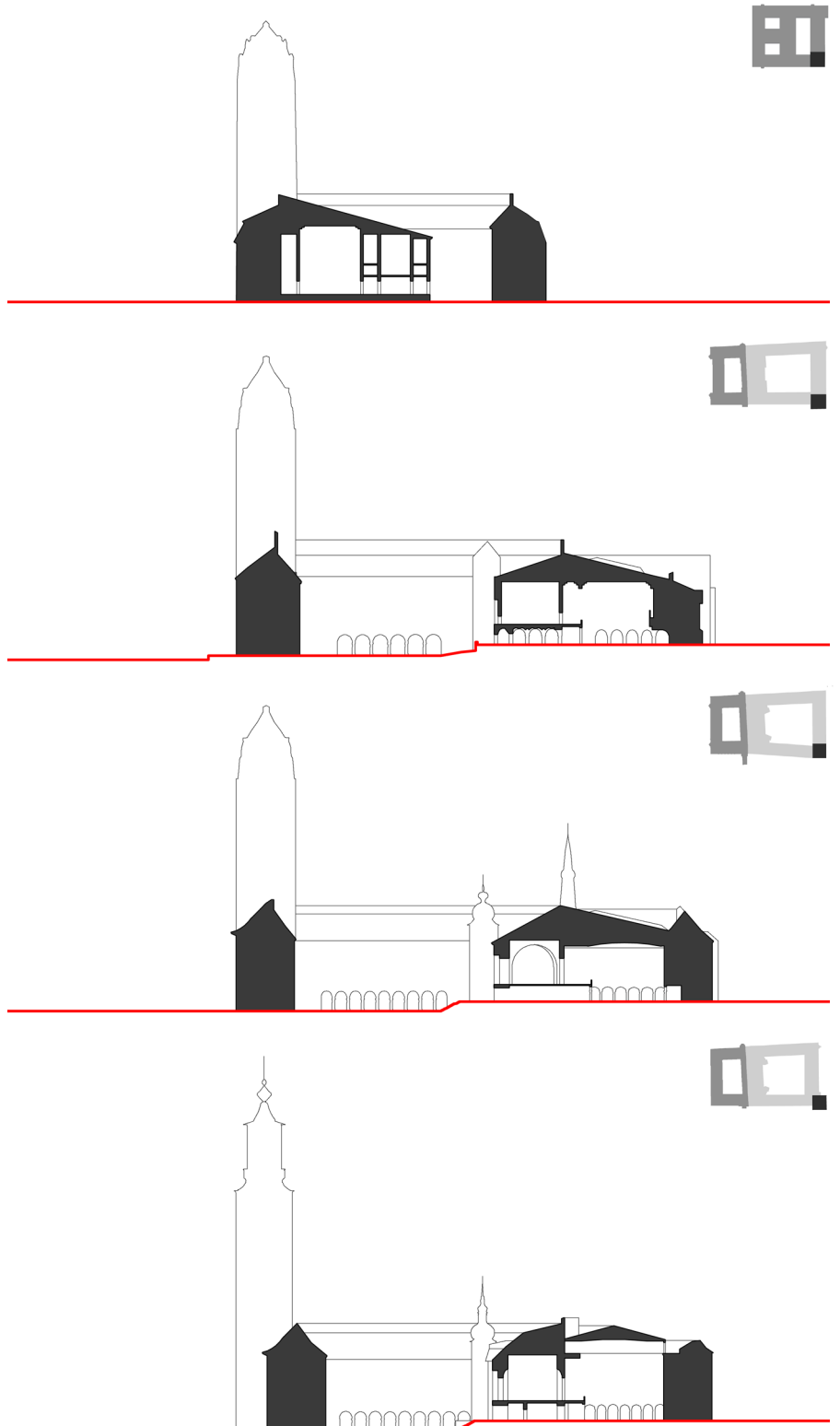
1905

1908-11

1912

1916

*Author's drawing*





### 3.1 THE NOTION OF THE *NORDEN* HOUSE. ANDERS ZORN, CARL LARSSON AND *ETT HEM*

*Sweden, Sweden, Sweden, our native land,  
village of our heart's desire, our home on earth.*

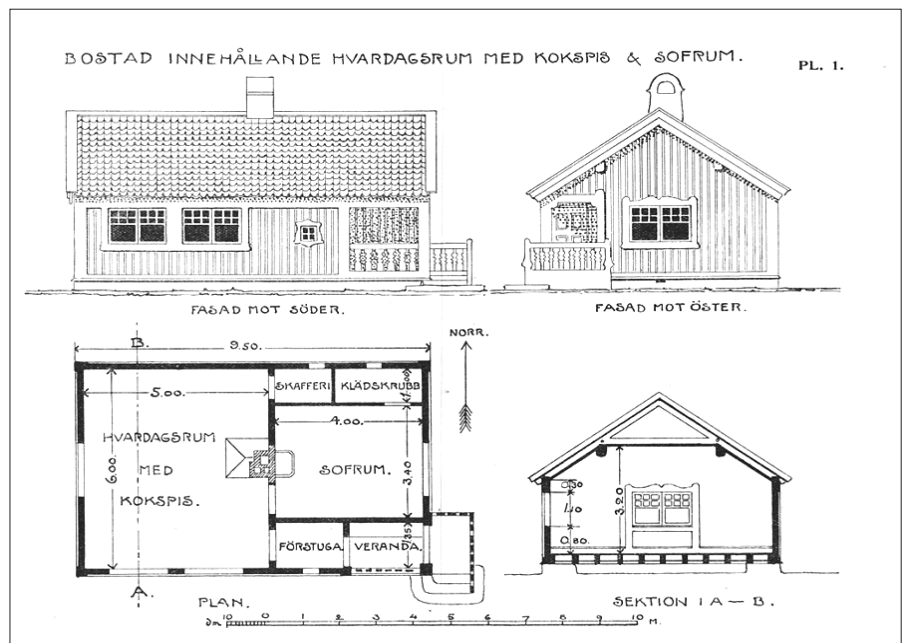
Gustaf Verner von Heidenstam, Sverige, 1899<sup>37</sup>

As nationalistic feeling began to spread, Swedish philosopher-literati underscored the importance of the *habitus*, as found in peasant life in the countryside, the soul of the “folk”.

In such imagery, Sweden meant simultaneously the “vast native land” and the “intimate home”. Östberg would conclude his booklet about home (1905)<sup>38</sup> by highlighting this twofold theme. He called for residents to hang the flag on a pole in their garden and proudly preserve and cultivate the tiny portion - house and garden - of that wider land that is Sweden. Housing design embodied a sense of identity, encompassing national, regional and local values. Some visual artists, such as Anders Zorn and Carl Larsson, stressed the notion of the ideal home, and celebrated the region of *Dalecarlia* as a symbol of true *Swedishness*. There they built open-air studios that served as a model and spur to Lars Israel Wahlman, Carl

Cover of *Ett hem*, 1905

Plate PL. 1 attached in the pamphlet



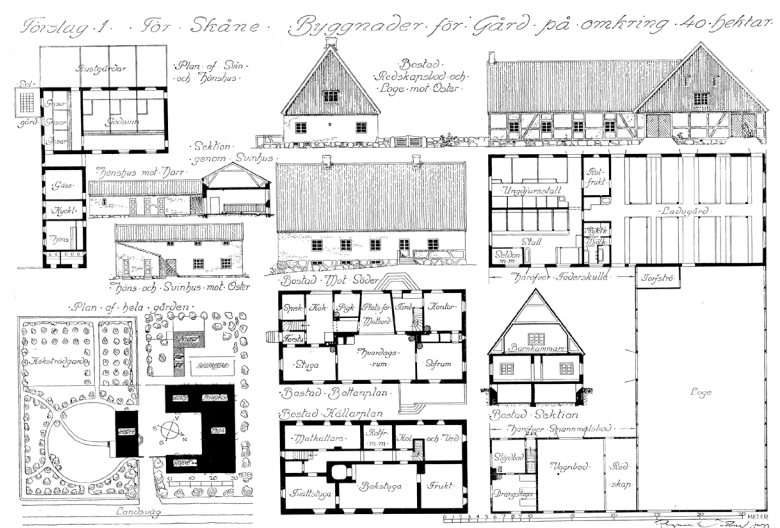
Westam and Ragnar Östberg.

Architects would explore many regions for traces of the vernacular architecture scattered in countryside or forest: wooden farmhouses in the main. For instance, Östberg was awarded a travel grant (spring-summer 1893) by the Academy to research into two northern regions -*Dalecarlia* and *Uppland*- an experience that sparked off his fascination with *allmogehem* (peasant houses). Architects sketched and took notes on such journeys and these formed the core of a later investigation of manor houses, entitled *Svenska Allmogehem* (1909)<sup>39</sup>. Östberg himself took part in this lengthy group research, which set out to demonstrate how peasants and labourers might themselves build simple, cheap houses conveying Swedish character.

The title of Östberg's pamphlet - *Ett hem. Dess Byggnad och inredning* - captured two fundamental themes of the *fin de siècle* architectural debate: construction (*byggnad*) and interior design (*inredning*); the enduring dilemma of their relationship is summed up in *ett hem* (home). To quote the Swedish architect: *a home should be seen as a shelter designed for the occupants' comfort*. Inspired by Larsson's own *Ett hem* ("A home", 1899),<sup>40</sup> a collection of watercolours depicting traditional interiors and domestic life, Östberg described all the fundamental features of domestic design and outlined five simple homemade houses for the lower classes through drawings and notes.

Cover of the architects' research project  
*Svenska Allmogehem*, 1909

Östberg's survived drawings about a traditional example of the southern region, called *Skåne* in *Svenska Allmogehem*, 1909



### 3.2 ANOTHER INTERPRETATION OF HOUSING: AN URBAN VILLA IN THE *DIPLOMATSTADEN*

*Desire burgeons and turns into a delicious kind of rage that devours obstacles  
as fire consumes the stubble.*

*This accounts for the haste and ardour of birds to build their nests.*

*But the bird is its own architect [...] The bird in short is the builder.*

*I had failed to see that the secret of ancient architecture's beauty and excellence  
lay largely in the fact that the architect  
is not just a theoretician or draughtsman,  
but a master craftsman:*

*Thus, insofar as you take a serious hand in things,  
and transform them into authentic manual work which makes a positive  
contribution,  
the house will have a history and meaning for you  
which it could never have in any other circumstances.*

John Burroughs, *Construire sa maison*, 1876<sup>41</sup>

In the following pages:

Historical maps and comparative  
drawings about the evolution of the  
portion of *Kungsholmen* peninsula

© *Stockholm Stadsarkiv*  
*Author's drawing*





1642



1702

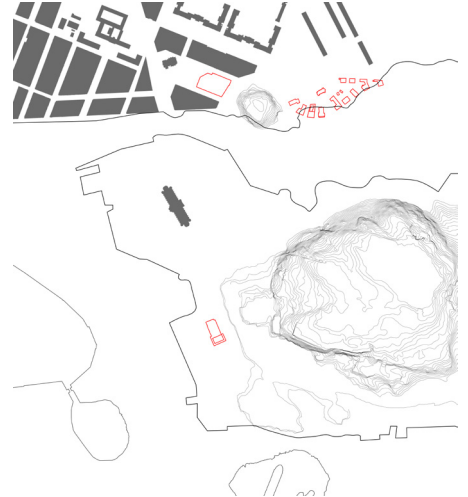


1805





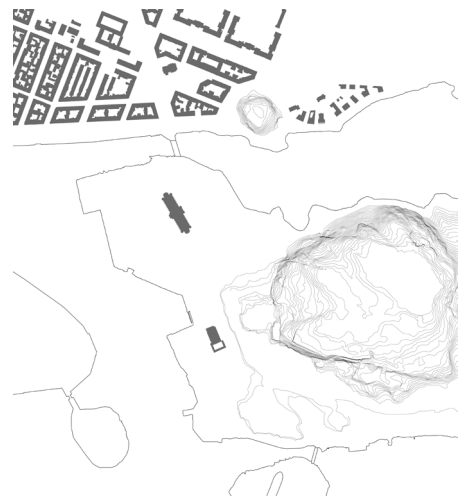
1899



1913



1940





Before describing the ideas and principles behind *Villa Geber*, a word on Swedish domestic culture and specifically on Östberg's previous projects in this genre.

Since the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the core European debate about designing new houses had concerned the “single-family house”. Another common aspect was the target customer, now taken to be the nascent bourgeoisie. As a consequence, the new type of architecture would evidently have to dialogue with new urban patterns, and even more it would have to express the social and cultural values of that social class. Östberg and other architects tackled the “single-family house” project, selecting and combining stimulating inputs from different local and foreign examples.

The most disparate models of isolated houses, cottages and *allmogehem* were a fruitful source of inspiration. For this reason, their original specifications were noticeably transformed and ennobled in their new houses for the bourgeoisie, as suggested by H. R. Hitchcock (1958)<sup>42</sup>. Architects imported the concept of “villa”, but they inverted and “democratised” the meaning of that dwelling type: from an imposing building in the Italian taste set in spacious grounds, to a house of modest dimensions situated on the fringe of the city. J. C. Loudon (1839)<sup>43</sup> said that the “villa” served to add extra comfort to the pleasure of exhibiting taste and wellbeing.

Östberg expressed his opinion on the use of term “villa” and the hybrid application of the type. At the beginning Swedish architects introduced that term in a simply playful way, but after a while they understood how dense in inspiration that model was for Swedish housing and interior

Postcard of the *Diplomatstaden* quarter,  
winter 1927

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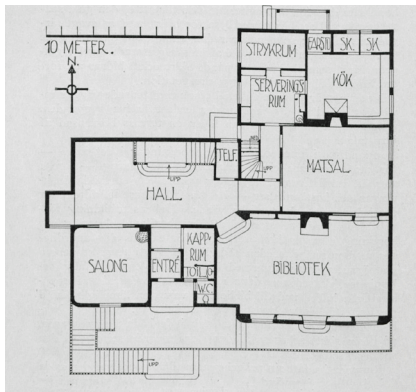




South façade with the long veranda  
in *Ord och bild*, 1911

*Eva Bonniers sommarbostad,  
Dalarö*

*Ph. author*

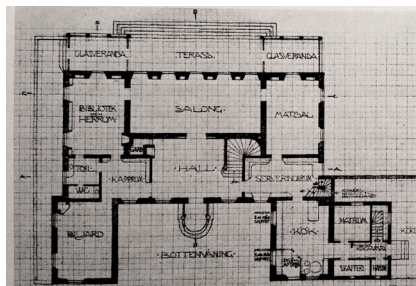


Ground floor plan

© in R. Östberg *En arkitekts anteckningar*  
(1927)

*villa Ekarne from the Djurgårdsvägen*

*Ph. author*



Ground floor plan

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*villa Elfviks Udde from the opposite  
shore, Lidingö*

*Ph. author*



design (1911)<sup>44</sup>.

The three houses that marked Östberg's evolution more than any other in terms of home design were *Eva Bonnier's sommarbostad* (Dalarö 1904), *villa Ekarne* (Djurgården, 1905) and *villa Elfviks Udde* (Lidingö, 1911).

The first was a clear reinterpretation of the Swedish wooden *allmogehems*, the second showed Secessionist features and the third was partly indebted to M.H. Baille Scott's projects. All of them were built in the wild outskirts of Stockholm, as was *villa Geber*. Our case-study combined all these allusions and adaptations, until it became a unique example.



### 3.3 AN INTROVERTED URBAN CHARACTER. REPERTOIRE OF IMAGES AND SCENERIES

*Life starts off well, being embraced,  
protected, warmed in the bosom of the home.*

*Gaston Bachelard, La poétique de l'espace, 1957*

*Villa Geber's courtyard, in other words a  
"secret garden" in a urban villa,  
winter 1914*

*in Östberg, Om tegelmaterialet vår byggnad-  
skonst, 1927*

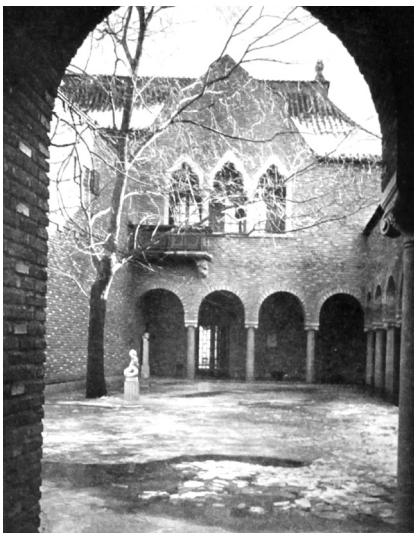
*© Arkitektur -och designcentrum  
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Commenting on *villa Geber* the British photographer F. R. Yerbury (1925)<sup>45</sup> said that it was a pearl of Swedish modern domestic architecture. This opinion manifests more than a mere fascination with this unique example among Nordic architecture, it also offers models it draws on. But what are the travel memories and "scraps of collage"<sup>46</sup> that composed this *palatium in forma urbis*?

In the villa, two dialectical ways of conceptualizing a house coexist: a severe urban palace and an inward-looking space embodied by a courtyard.

The first example of a courtyard house was found in the Greek city of Priene, after which it was introduced in the Latin *insula* using certain irregularities due to urban building requirements. The courtyard house is basically enclosed in itself, so as to protect it from what happens beyond its walls as in the Latin *insula*, but, in this specific case, the villa seems to offer protection from the severe Nordic climate.

In classical towns houses looked onto the courtyard and this feature



remained even in Renaissance palaces. From the 19th century on, new ways of thinking and designing inverted that perception, where the rooms of an urban house became a privileged observation point onto the city and its dynamics. This condition well describes the French urban *hôtel de ville*.

In contrast, *villa Geber* is a partially isolated house that represents a specific way of looking at the city. In his plans Östberg summarizes two kinds of visual relationship: on the one hand, the succession of rooms in the palace-villa look onto the southern canal and the northern courtyard, on the other hand, the intimate “petrified garden” of the courtyard can be appreciated from the portico on three sides.

Distortion in the general composition was introduced to set up a proper interplay with P. O. Hallman’s radial urban plan, in which the villa is placed. As Serlio<sup>47</sup> stated in the seventh volume, the deformities affect mainly secondary rooms, staircases, hallways or vestibules. In this way the layout of the *villa Geber* resembles the irregular Venetian palaces built during the *renovatio urbis* age or some Renaissance or Baroque urban palaces in Rome and Stockholm itself.

*Villa Geber*: a Venetian palace along the fresh lake Mälaren streams

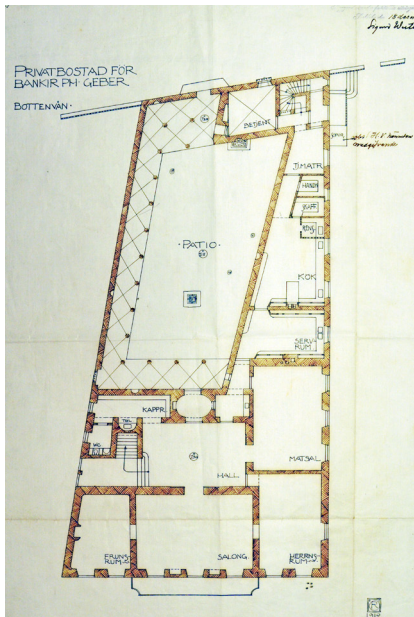
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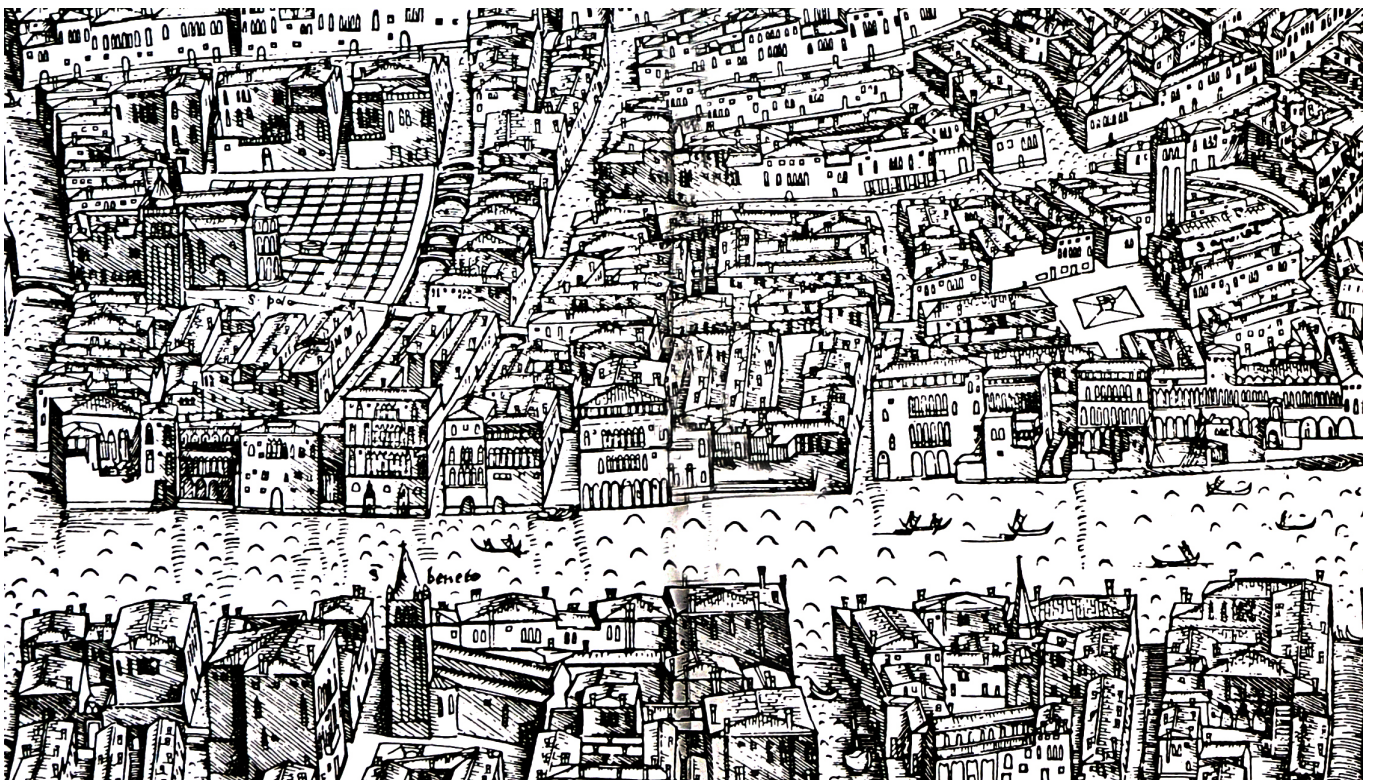
Östberg, Ground floor plans of *villa Geber*, 1911

© Stockholms Stadsarkiv



J. de' Barbari, Extract of Carta di Venezia. Canal Grande, 1500

© Museo Correr, Venezia







## 4.1 “GRANDE PIANTA”.

*STOCKHOLMS STADSHUSET-NÄMNDHUSET*

*A building is a structure in the sense that each space and elements  
has to dialogue closely with each other element as well as with the whole [...]  
a building is an autonomous arrangement of internal dependencies,  
that is, a structure including form and contents.*

Ludovico Quaroni, *Progettare un edificio. Otto lezioni di architettura*, 1977 <sup>48</sup>

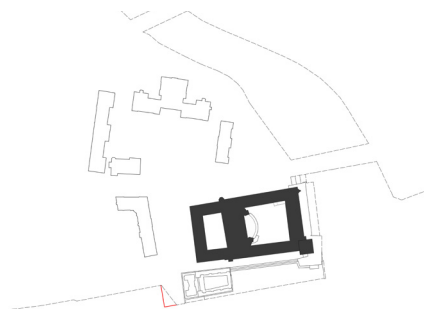
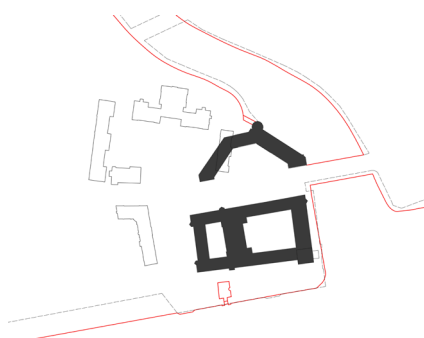
The present section forms the conclusion to this interpretative appraisal of the first case-study, and above all it aims to make the formal structures he assembled explicit and show how the layout matches the design purpose. Analysing Östberg’s original mania for drawing and re-drawing is what triggered this study.

The comparative analysis of many proposals focus their interest mainly in the evolution of assembling types expressed in ground and first floors. The horizontal dimension condensed in a plan is none other than a transposition of an idea in visible image. Thus, the concept of the “grande pianta” does not refer to a plan on a huge scale, but to a composition of a higher order, where composition is seen as the art of assembling through separating.<sup>49</sup> The “grande pianta” is a powerful tool for visual and dimensional control over the urban form, considering its ability to arrange elements, figures and portions in spatial sequence.

The *École des Beaux-Arts* experience with the great urban plan were the first to applied the compositional method of the “grande pianta”. They sought to outline some valid and useful principles for designing a good plan. It seems in fact to have been the Latin world that first viewed the plan as an invention of disparate types. Large-scale urban architecture and city plans hence develop the same narrative properties in terms of architectural composition, although they are examples of different project scale. All the architects involved in a complex urban-scale project like the centre *Stockholms Stadshuset-Nämndhuset* had to control the urban form and theatrical design in that “part of the city”. Östberg’s proposals for the centre reveal a clear devotion to Sitte’s *Raumkunst* theories, for

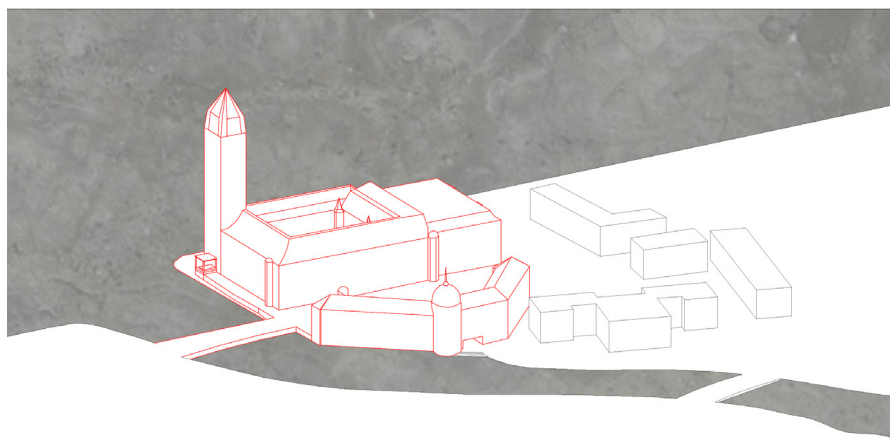
which the key point in designing a city lay in projecting different spatial sequences composed of many memories concerning collective spaces or urban voids.

Thus, the aim of this section is principally to show the projected urban changes to the *Eldkevarnen* area and the entire centre. The Administration building is naturally not so rich as the Town Hall, but if one focuses on both projects, it becomes clear how strong the architect's sense of space was.



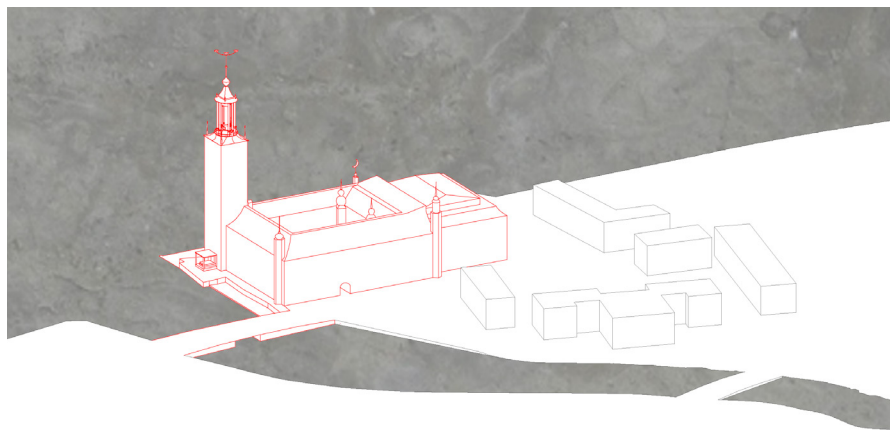
1908-1911

*Author's drawing*



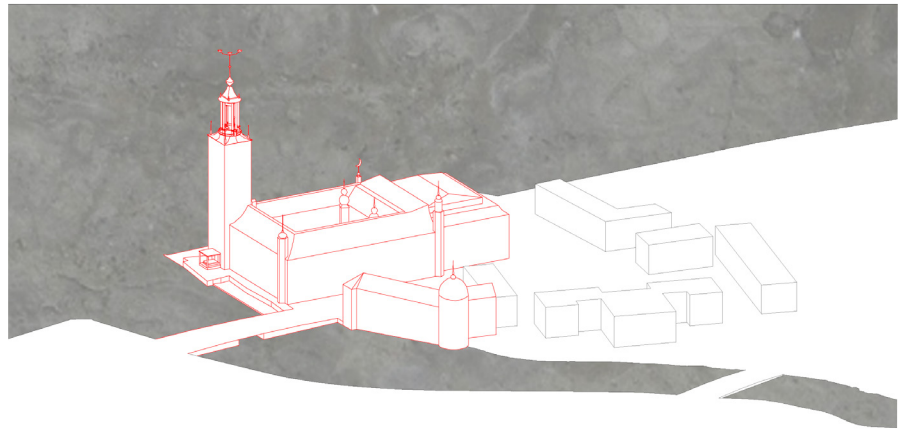
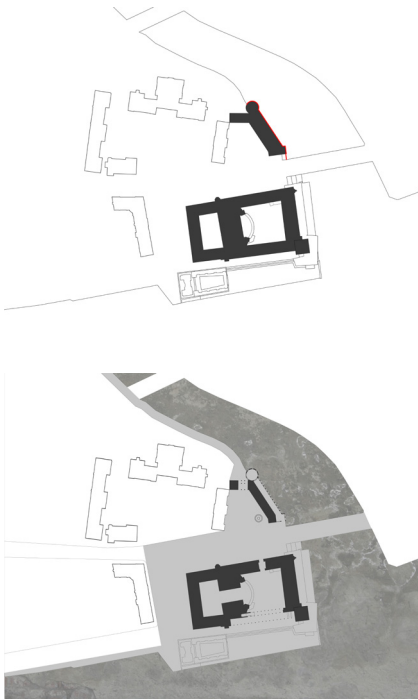
1916-1923

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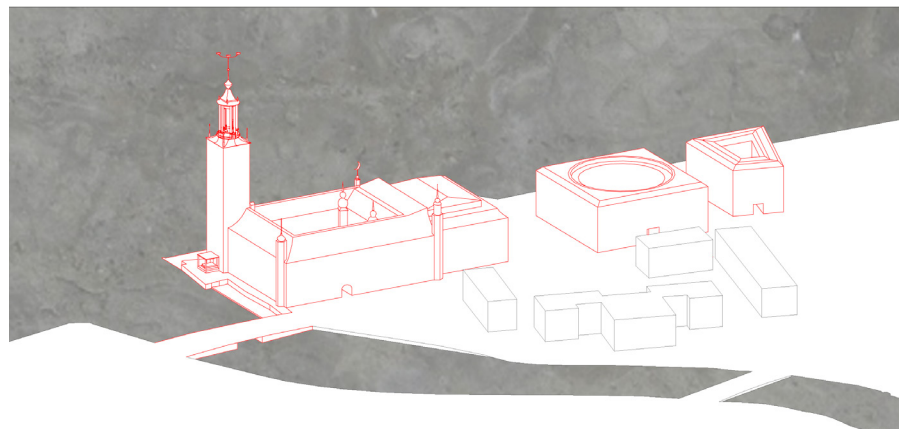
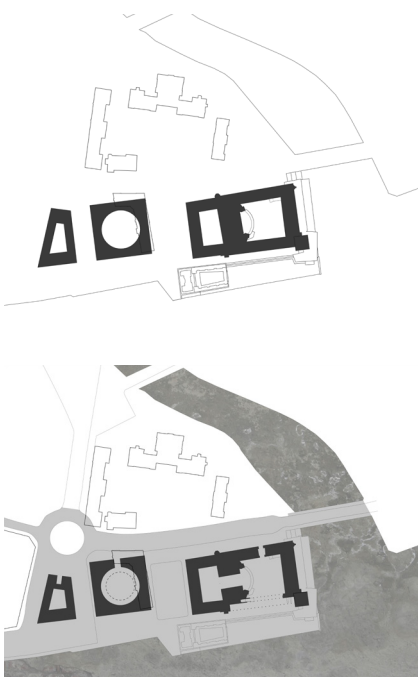
1930

*Author's drawing*



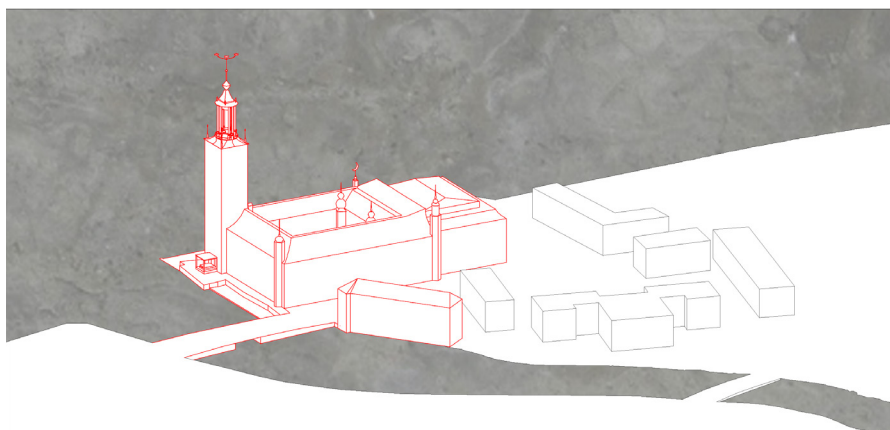
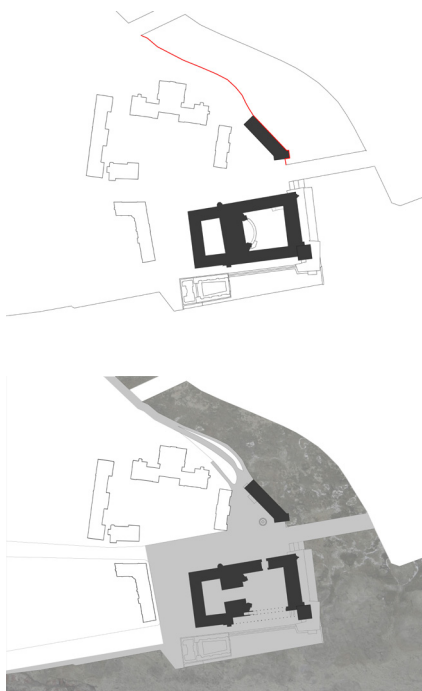
1936

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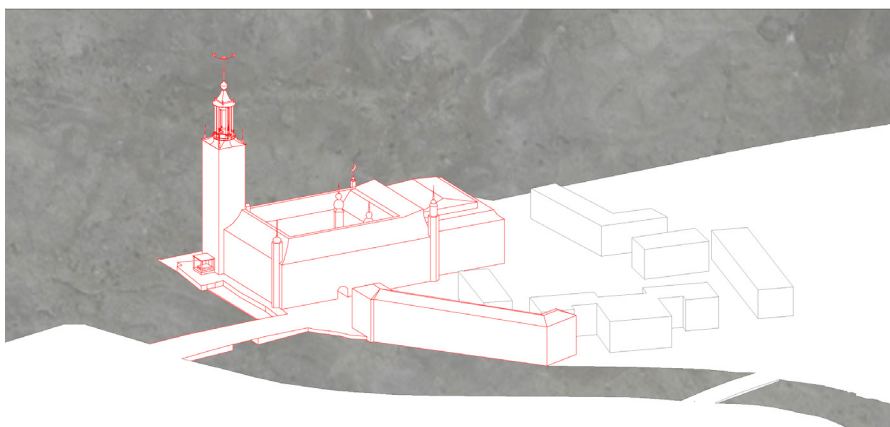
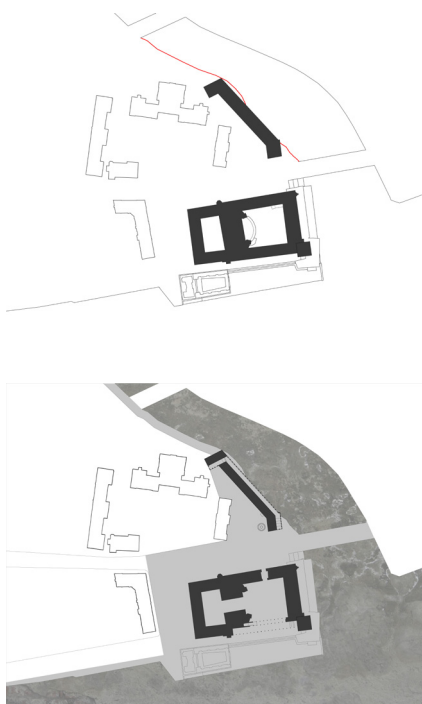
1939

*Author's drawing*



1940

*Author's drawing*





## 4.2 “PALATIUM IN FORMA URBIS”.

## THE STOCKHOLMS STADSHUSET AND VILLA GEBER

*The limit is not the point where something finishes,  
but, as the Greeks well knew, it is the starting point of the “essence” [...]  
Space is essentially what it is cleared, what is enclosed in its own limits.*

Martin Heidegger, *Wohnen, Bauen, Denken*, 1951 <sup>50</sup>

This research entails two case-studies, two different aspects of living that have been separately considered hitherto, but here it is time to compare them through a typological and figurative investigation. Several critics have actually underlined this interpretation, in other words that *Stockholms Stadshuset* and *villa Geber* were reciprocally testing grounds for a similar compositional approach, but nobody has conducted an in-depth analysis until now. Then, the focus of this paragraph is on *Stockholms Stadshuset* and *villa Geber*.

Östberg’s thoughts were focused on villa Geber (1911-1913) at that important time for the final layout of the Town Hall. It is evident that the critics were stressing the superficial similarity of the “courtyard type”, but the construction holds more than a formal similarity. Hence, this section deliberately does not consider the unbuilt part of the municipal centre. Their main feature is undoubtedly the inner space, in this specific case the courtyard. Heidegger’s concept of “limit” is a clear expression of that archetypal figure, the “enclosure”. It is a device to enhance both the inner and the outer space, and express their unity as well.

The purpose of the present section is to describe all the analogies that inspired the two projects and how they resemble Alberti’s nutshell. We can trace a similar spatial relationship between the urban-square concept and the patio-house. Indeed, the *palatium in forma urbis* concept harks back to its Latin origins. And just as the city layout is formed of permanent and changeable features, so the *palatium in forma urbis* evolves and hybridizes the rules of the city. The “people’s house” and the private house are a condensation of many historical models and travel memoirs, which the architect exploited, along with irregularities of the terrain, to overcome

certain architectural conflicts.

Hence, two slightly different proposals for *villa Geber* are investigated, while the Stockholm Town hall is studied through three proposals: 1908-11, 1912 and 1916.

The two projects exemplify the universal character of architecture of “staging” features of common life in which people are on show, as suggested by Hamon<sup>51</sup>. The only way to penetrate their massive brick walls is to explore their spatial sequences, each occupying a specific place in the narrative: entering (*limen, solea*, threshold), receiving (*atrium* and *vestibulum*), moving (layout of rooms, corridors, staircases), looking out and leaving.

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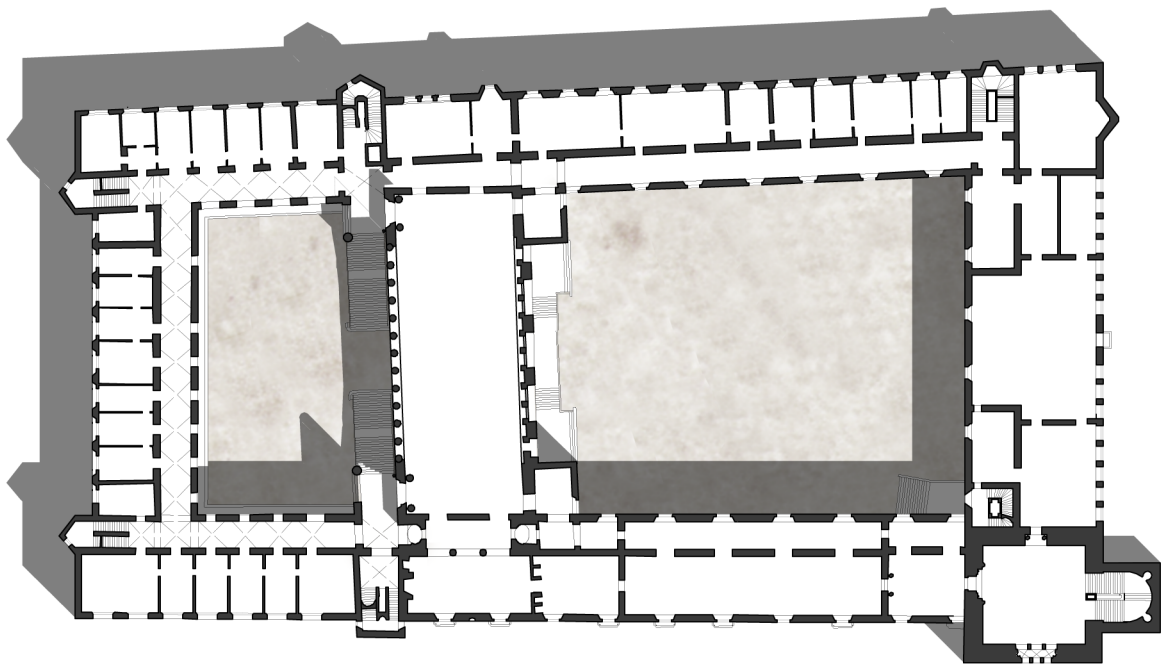
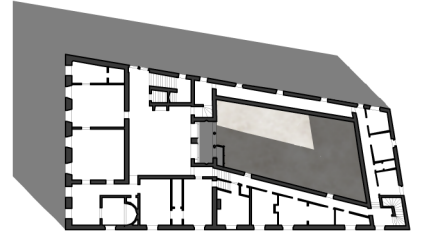
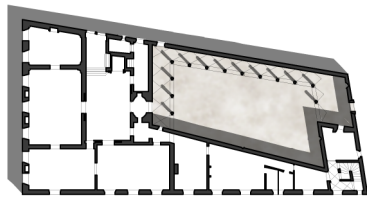
Ground and first floor plans

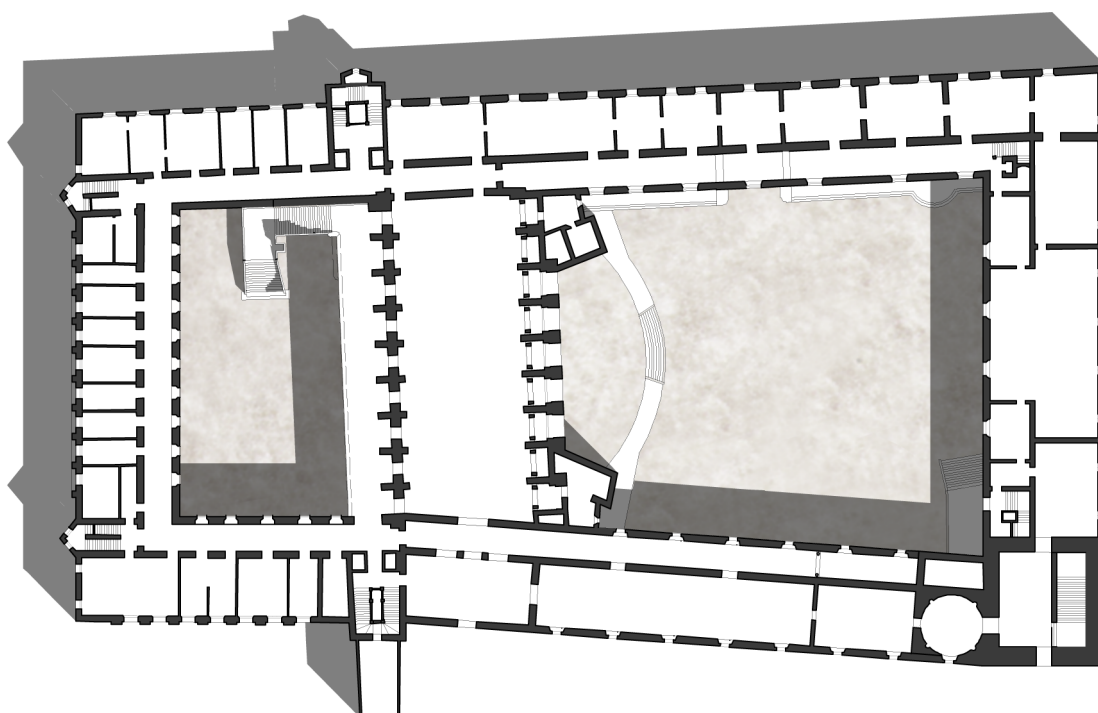
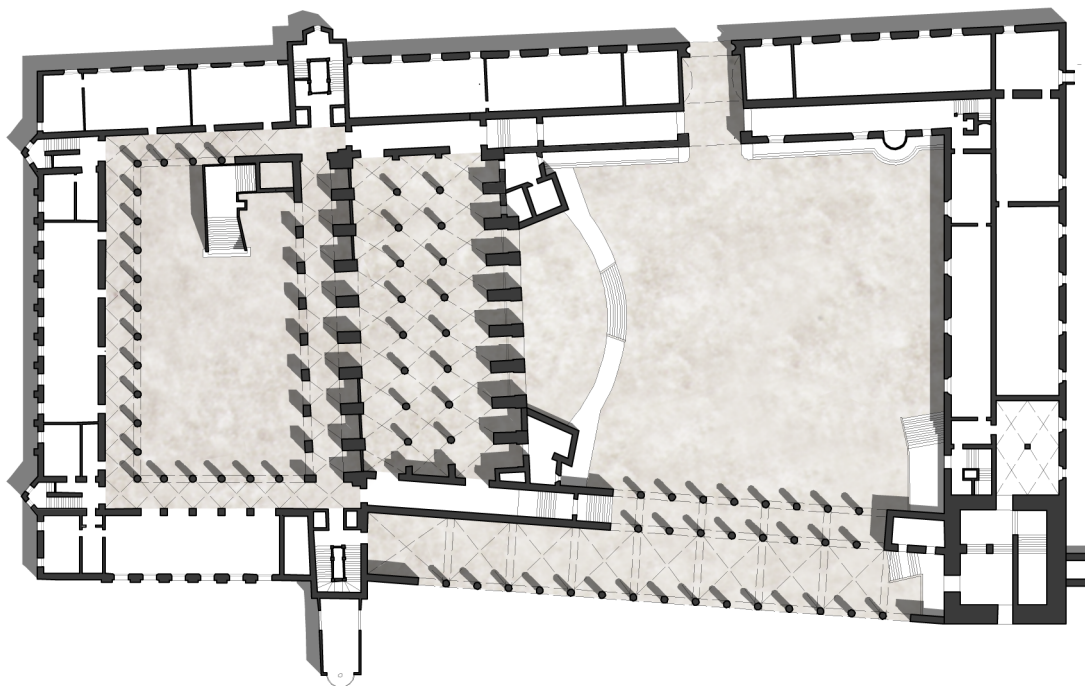
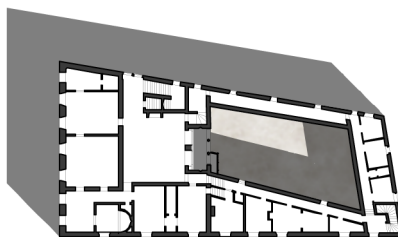
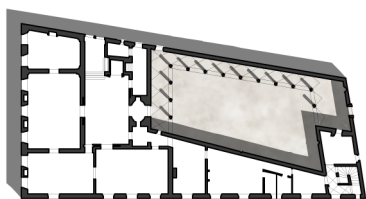
*villa Geber*, 1913

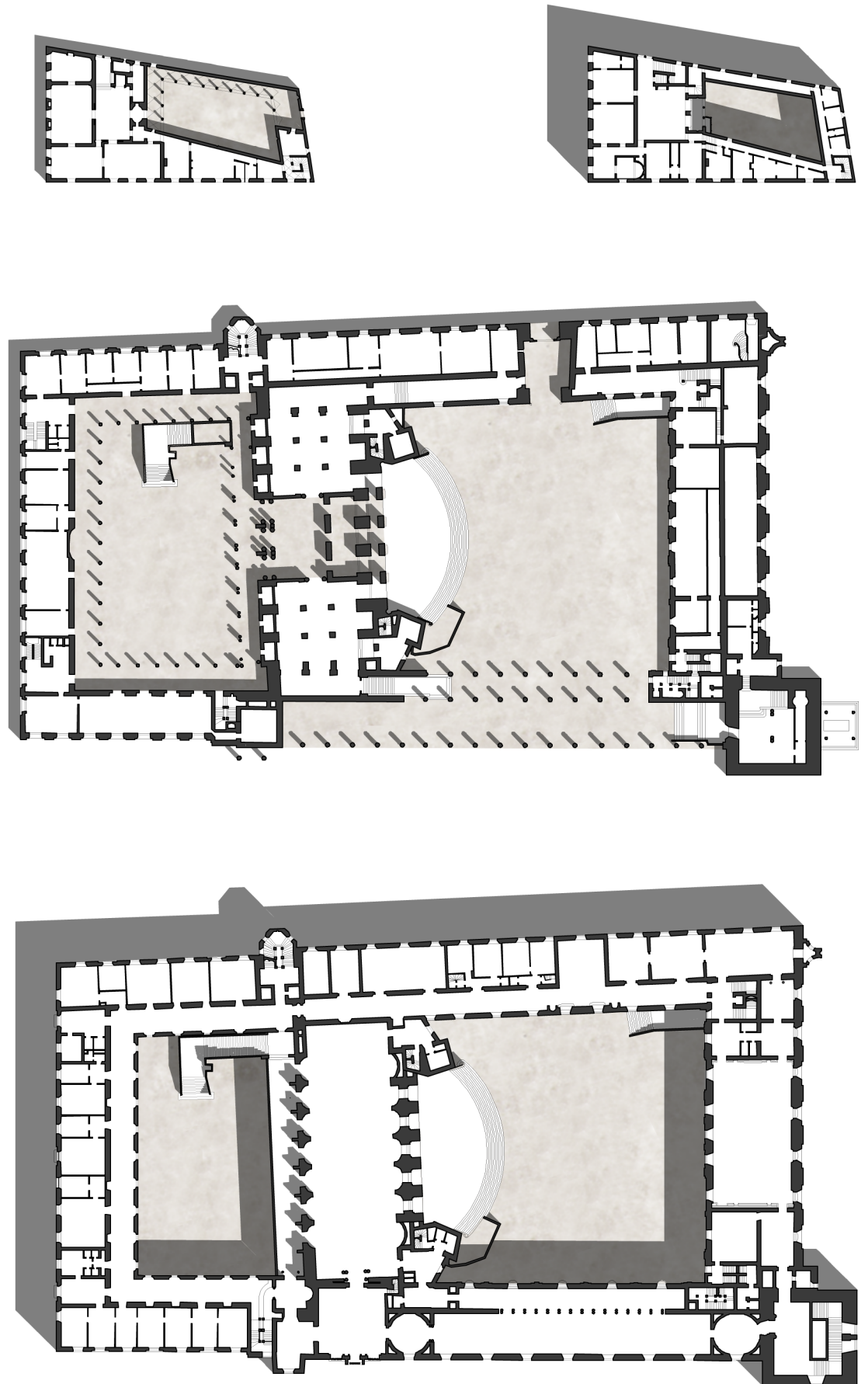
*Stockholm Stadshuset*, 1908, 1912 e 1912

1:1000

*Author's drawing*











## CONCLUSION

*Architecture can form a building that appears to spring naturally from its surroundings, simply by introducing something of the surrounds into the staircase, the materials, the kind of construction and the motifs of the building [...]  
One tends to forget that the style of the place is more important than the style of the times.*

E. G. Asplund<sup>52</sup>

*Collective memory and its scientific form, history, apply to two types of materials: documents and monuments.*

Jacques Le Goff, voce “*Documento/Monumento*”, 1978<sup>53</sup>

This voyage of discovery inside Östberg’s architectural idiom is close to the end. Asplund and Le Goff’s quotations remind us that oscillation between seeking the *genius loci* and harking back to traditional urban forms. Indeed, the present study was conducted according to this twofold interpretation, applied to the two case-studies.

*Genius loci* and *urban memories* are explicit here through the comments of E. G. Asplund and J. Le Goff. Östberg’s pupil recommends bearing in mind the “style of the locus” when one designs a building. The idea is akin to a “voyage of initiation” in search of the morphological and historical features of a place. In the case of Stockholm, this entails catching the meaning of that fragile and fragmented place that is the archipelago.

By contrast, the French historian reminds us that collective memory can be found in monuments. They embody the relationship of the people to the *locus* and the idea of the latter.

The projects analysed sum up ideas, analogies and developments, as the history of architecture has so frequently related. It is fair to say that certain details in both projects suggest a historical or eclectic approach, but Östberg had a bond with history, since architecture in general inevitably has a constant bond with its own origins. Those details reveal a

specific relation with tradition: they are more than a mere expression of the “style of the times”.

The *Stockholms Stadshuset-Nämndhuset* and *villa Geber* exemplify a specific conception of architecture suited to the Nordic capital, but can also be a valid example for anyone designing a building. Östberg’s legacy is not immutable and rigid, it is still capable of being transformed as is the analogical design method itself. Stockholm resembles this *in fieri* tendency: like its sibling Venice, it cannot be seen as a closed form. The physical and morphological reasons for these two cities lie in something elusive, something that fades away in the haze of their myth or fairy-tale origins.

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